

# WERNER HERZOG

# EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF

# AND GOD AGAINST ALL

A MEMOIR

## **ALSO BY WERNER HERZOG**

*The Twilight World*  
*A Guide for the Perplexed*  
*Conquest of the Useless*  
*Of Walking in Ice*  
Scenarios series

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EVERY MAN  
FOR HIMSELF  
AND GOD  
AGAINST ALL

A MEMOIR

WERNER HERZOG

*Translated by Michael Hofmann*

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*OceanofPDF.com*

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Enkidu heaved a sigh and said:  
“Gilgamesh, the guard in the forest never sleeps.”  
Gilgamesh replied: “Show me the man  
who can climb right up into heaven.”

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# FOREWORD

**T**he original ending of my film *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* went like this: the raft with the conquistadors has nothing but corpses on board, and when it reaches the mouth of the Amazon, the only living creature on it is a speaking parrot. As the Atlantic tide pushes back against the mighty river, the parrot is incessantly screeching two words: “El Dorado, El Dorado.” Then, while filming, I found a much better solution: the raft is overrun by hundreds of little monkeys, and Aguirre raves to them about his new empire. Quite recently, I came upon another, unverified account of the historical Aguirre. Abandoned by all and having murdered his own daughter so that she isn’t witness to his disgrace, he orders his last follower to shoot him. The man sets his musket against Aguirre’s body and shoots him in the middle of the chest. “That was nothing,” says Aguirre, and he tells the man to load again. This time the man shoots him through the heart. “That should do,” says Aguirre, and he falls down dead.

I’m sure the version with the monkeys is the perfect ending for the film, but I wonder how many other possibilities, how many roads not taken, there were for me, not only in film plots and stories but in my life, roads I never took, or only took years later.

The title for this book is one I used before for my film about Kaspar Hauser, but almost no one seemed able to produce it correctly. This is my second attempt with it. Perhaps it makes me sound like too much of a lone warrior. Whereas, in fact, I almost always had helpers, family, women. With very few exceptions, this book is not about them. They all were independent, strong, beautiful, and smart. Without them, I would have been just a shadow of myself.

What then did destiny have in mind for me? How did it keep changing the direction of my life? At the same time, many things remained constant —a vision that never left me and, as with a good soldier, such qualities as loyalty, duty, courage. I always wanted to defend outposts others have already abandoned. How much could have been predicted? From the Japanese soldier Hiroo Onoda, who finally surrendered twenty-nine years after the end of the Second World War, I learned that in evening light it is possible to see a bullet fired at one like a tracer round. For a split second, one can see the future.

I was just working on the end of my book. I looked up because I saw a flash across the window, something shooting at me, copper red and bright green. But it wasn't a stray enemy bullet. It was a hummingbird. At that moment, I decided to lay down my pen. The last sentence breaks off at the point I had just reached.

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## 1

## STARS, THE SEA

**T**he lamentations ended about noon. Some of the women had screamed and torn their hair. When they were gone, I went to see for myself. It was a small stone building by the cemetery in the hamlet called Hora Sfakion on the south coast of Crete, just a few houses scattered over the steep cliffs. I was sixteen. The tiny chapel had an opening, no door. In the half-dark within, I saw two corpses so close to each other, they were touching. They were both men. Later I was told that they had killed each other in the night; in that remote, archaic part of the world, they still had the vendetta, or blood vengeance. All I remember now is the face of the man on the right. It was lavender blue with splotches of yellow. Emerging from the nostrils were two enormous pads of cotton wool soaked full of blood. He had been hit in the chest with a load of buckshot.

At nightfall, I went out to sea. I was working for a few nights on a fishing boat; it would have to have been on the few dark nights either side of the new moon. One boat towed six skiffs called *lampades* out to sea, each one of them with one man on board. There we were all dropped a couple of hundred yards apart and left to drift. The sea was as glossy smooth as silk, no waves. An immense silence. Each skiff had a big carbide lamp that was shining down into the deep. The lamp attracted the fish, especially cuttlefish. There was a strange method of fishing for them. At the end of a fishing line was a small shiny piece of wax paper about the size and shape of a cigarette. That attracted the cuttlefish, which grasped the booty in their tentacles. To help them hold on, the bait had a wire wreath

fixed to it. You had to know just exactly how far down the lure was below the surface because the instant the cuttlefish felt themselves being pulled up into the air, they would straightaway relinquish their booty and drop back into the water. You had to accelerate the last arm's length of line so that you were able to swing the cuttlefish onto your skiff.

The first few hours were spent in silent waiting until eventually the artificial moon of the lamp began to take effect. Above me was the orb of the cosmos, stars that I felt I could reach up and grab; everything was rocking me in an infinite cradle. And below me, lit up brightly by the carbide lamp, was the depth of the ocean, as though the dome of the firmament formed a sphere with it. Instead of stars, there were lots of flashing silvery fish. Bedded in a cosmos without compare, above, below, all around, a speechless silence, I found myself in a stunned surprise. I was certain that there and then I knew all there was to know. My fate had been revealed to me. And I knew that after one such night, it would be impossible for me to ever get any older. I was completely convinced I would never see my eighteenth birthday because, lit up by such grace as I now was, there could never be anything like ordinary time for me again.

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## EL ALAMEIN

**S**ome time ago, in some papers, I came upon a postcard from my mother dated September 6, 1942, and written in pencil. The stamp with Adolf Hitler's likeness was preprinted on it. The postmark is clearly readable: *Munich, center of the movement*. The postcard is addressed to *Herr Professor Dr. R. Herzog and Family, Grosshesselohe nr. Munich*. To my grandfather then, Rudolf Herzog, the patriarch of the family. My mother chose not to inform my father.

“*Dear Father,*” she writes to my grandfather. “*I want to tell you that I gave birth last night to a baby boy. He is to be named Werner. Best wishes, Liesel.*” My given name, Werner, was an act of insubordination against my father, who wanted me to be called Eberhard. At the time of my birth, my father was a soldier in France, not at any front but, because he knew how to make himself scarce, behind the lines, where supplies were distributed, specifically food rations. He had sired me in the course of his most recent, no doubt hard-earned furlough shortly after the new year. My mother later discovered that he had spent the first part of his ten days’ leave with some other woman and presented himself afterward.

I was born just before the turning point of the Second World War. In the East, the German Wehrmacht was laying siege to Stalingrad, which was to lead to a catastrophic German defeat within months, while in North Africa General Rommel was trying to push through to El Alamein, which would soon lead to a similar debacle for the so-called Thousand-Year Reich. Much later, when I was twenty-three and had to leave the United States in a hurry

because I had violated the terms of my visa and was on the point of being expatriated back to Germany, I fled to Mexico, where I had to find some way of earning money for a living. I worked in the *charreadas*, a Mexican form of rodeo, as a kind of arena clown, riding on young bullocks even though I'd never even ridden a horse before. My chosen sobriquet was El Alamein, because no one could say my real name and for simplicity's sake referred to me as *el Aleman*, or the German. I, however, insisted on El Alamein because, to the glee of the crowds, I was severely beaten at every appearance, a tacit nod then to the German defeat in the North African desert. Each Saturday this defeat and, to be more specific, the injuries I inevitably incurred could be marveled at anew.

Barely two weeks after my birth, Munich, the “center of the movement,” was subjected to one of the early Allied bombing raids. My mother was then living in the city in a small attic studio at Elisabethstrasse 3. Thirteen years later, we would move into a pension in the same building, just one floor lower down, where I would make the acquaintance of the madman Klaus Kinski and his periodic meltdowns. In 1942, though, before I could remember anything, lots of buildings around about were leveled, and the building in which my life had lately begun was badly damaged. My mother found me in my cradle covered in a thick layer of broken glass, bricks, and rubble. I was unhurt, but my mother in her panic snatched up my older brother, Tilbert, and me and left the city and fled up into the mountains to Sachrang, surely the remotest place in all Bavaria, in a narrow valley up against the Austrian border. That was where I grew up. My mother knew one or two people there and, through their help, found somewhere for us to stay on the Berger farm outside the village—not in the farmhouse itself but in the so-called dower house, a tiny adjacent building where, by Bavarian custom, the old farmer couple moved to once the oldest son took over the farm. We lived in the lower floor of that; a refugee family from Hamelin in Northern Germany was quartered above us.

I will come to my father and his side of the family. First, however, my mother's family, the Stipetićs, who came from Croatia, originally from Split in Dalmatia, and later moved from there to Zagreb, the capital, which at the

time was still called by its German name, Agram. My forefathers had been senior administrators and officers, and my grandfather, whom I never got to meet because he died when my mother was just eighteen, had been a major on the Habsburg general staff. From her accounts, though, he seems to have had a penchant for surreal humor and the absurd. For two years he was stationed in Üsküp (modern-day Skopje) and all that time wore only one glove. Later, in a café in Vienna, he took off both gloves in the presence of a waiter, and to universal astonishment, he had one hand that was deeply tanned and the other was as white as snow. In full gala uniform, quite the rebel, he would play games of marbles with street urchins, and distinguish himself with his bizarre and wholly unmartial actions. The Croatian side of my family was nationalist in sympathies; they supported the independence of Croatia from the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. Such sympathies eventually led to fascism. With Hitler's support, a populist leader, a so-called *poglavnik*, took power in Croatia for three years until the war ended, and that was the end of that.

My grandmother came from a respectable family in Vienna; my mother was never especially close to her, because all her life she had scant regard for respectability. I only knew my grandmother from a handful of visits; the one occasion that lives in my memory is when I visited her with my mother, close to the end, in a home. My grandmother was confused and asked me for a glass of water, which I got for her at the sink. "Such a delicacy," she kept saying, taking tiny sips and thanking me over and over again for something so exquisite.

Lotte, my mother's younger sister, followed in the footsteps of that Austrian grandmother and also had little connection to my mother. She was a cordial-enough woman, with two children, a boy and a girl. The son, my cousin, a few years older than me and someone I got along with well, had a part to play at a dramatic turn in my life when at twenty-three I returned from the United States to Germany for the first time. I had left the first great love of my life in Germany at a time when we experienced some turbulence in our relationship because I had undergone a rapid development that had left her behind. I had met her when I was working in her parents' firm, a

small metallurgical company, as a spot welder on the night shift. I had started doing that while still in high school because I needed money for my first film productions. Perhaps out of insecurity, because I had failed to propose to her when I left, she had proceeded while I was off in the States to marry my cousin without informing me. When I returned, she was just back from her honeymoon and nevertheless ran away with me for a few days, but neither she nor I finally had it in us to rewrite history. Because she didn't want to go straight back to her husband, my cousin, I took her back to her parents, who were waiting for me with her four brothers. Or maybe there were only three; in my memory they have been built up into a massive superiority. I wasn't going to just drop my lover at her parents' door; I was perfectly prepared to confront them. Her brothers, powerful Bavarian lunks who all played ice hockey, had threatened to kill me if I showed my face. Her parents, quite properly, said much the same thing. I wasn't afraid, though, and walked into the house. I had had a strange encounter with my cousin the previous day, with my beloved torn this way and that between the two of us. I am convinced to this day that there was nothing physical, not the least contact, but I still had a swollen cheekbone, as though I'd received a powerful blow. It wasn't until four decades later at a family birthday that I next had a fleeting encounter with him, but we were never close again, though we both desired to be.

After this, my lover prior to my first trip to the United States seemed later in her life to be under a curse. She kept attracting misfortune. She had two children with my cousin, but the marriage broke up. Her subsequent relationships also ended badly. In the end, she jumped to her death off the Grosshesseloher Bridge. In old photographs of us together, we always look perfectly serene, with a lightheartedness that has no suggestion of the coming catastrophe. I am still upset with myself for somehow having deserted her in my time in the States without having had the courage to tell her. Women always played a dramatic role in my life, no doubt because there were deep feelings involved. But I never really saw the great mystery and agony of love. My relationships were hardly ever superficial. I was driven by the demon of love, but without women, my life would have been

nothing much. Sometimes I try to imagine a world without women. It would be unbearable, impoverished, a tumbling from one void to the next. But I was lucky in love, presumably luckier than I deserved to be.

My family on my father's side were all academics. Their roots are in Swabia, but one branch of the family were Huguenots by the name of de Neufville, who presumably fled persecution in France at the end of the seventeenth century and sought refuge in Frankfurt. My family tree never especially interested me, but I remember my father conducting inquiries that established that we were related to the mathematician Gauss and various other historical figures, including Charlemagne—but presumably that would be true of most Germans and French. The truth is that my father was more interested in finding a significance for us that we didn't possess. My father entered one of my half brothers, Ortwin, whom I barely know, a globe-trotter working for a semilegal commercial directory, as a *scientific explorer* in the family tree—as though he were a kind of second Humboldt. The older of my two half brothers, Markwart, whom I know slightly better—though both were damaged for life because, unlike me, they had the misfortune of having been raised by my father—is the only one of all of us siblings to have graduated with a degree. He studied Catholic theology and wrote a doctorate on the philosophical-religious significance of Christ's purported descent into Hell.

Ella, my grandmother on my father's side, a big, solid woman who over time and by sheer strength of character became something like the head of the whole clan, gave me profound insight into the family history, or perhaps better put, a kind of tunnel vision, a borehole into the depth of life of two persons, herself and her grandmother, in other words, my great-great-grandmother. This investigation into the depths of my ancestry was the only part that truly interested me. Ella wrote a memoir titled *For My Children and Grandchildren* that began: “Very well, you’re curious and would like to know how Grandfather came to be married to Grandmother.” This was dated “Christmas, 1891.”

The recollections of my great-great-grandmother go back to 1829. She grew up in East Prussia. “*My darling little girl,*” she writes to her grandchild, my grandmother, “*when I sent you a letter this past summer with recollections of our old home, you wrote to say you would like it if I wrote down some of the stories I told you from my childhood. Well, my earliest conscious memory dates back to my third year. I think the year must have been 1829. I seem to see myself in our drawing room in Schloss Gilgenburg. My mother, whose features are no longer present to me, is sitting on a chair at her sewing table busy with some handicraft in a window niche, the windows there were some way off the ground; I clamber up into the niche and then onto the chair; standing behind my mother, in my girlish way, I try to arrange and stroke her hair. Then the day comes that I seem to see before me still, and that I will never forget—I am in Mother’s bedroom, it’s morning, she has quit her bed and is lying on the sofa, I am playing beside her; there must be someone else in the room as well, because I hear the words: “She’s lost consciousness again,” and I hear a call for help, the servants come and pick her up and carry her back to bed. Then I hear another call: “Bring a warming pan for her feet.” The feet were rubbed and warmed, but it was no good; they would not be warm again. It was, as I later heard, the first time she had left her bed after the birth of my baby brother. The baby was stillborn, and I remember I was called in to look at him.*”

“*Father’s estates,*” she writes—talking about a time when she was six or seven years old—“*with their large forests, were home to many wild animals. Wild boar dwelt in the great oak forests, and even a number of wolves. Sometimes when we rode through the forest in the evening, the horses became nervous, and if you looked about you, you might see a pair of green eyes glinting in the undergrowth. Every year there was a great wolf hunt. The government had offered a bounty for every wolf that was shot. As long as there were wolves, there were also cubs. The foresters on their forays would sometimes come upon a wolf’s lair with cubs. While the old ones were away in the night*

*hunting for food, the foresters would pick up the cubs, put them in a sack, and empty them out in our room, where we children would jump about for joy and play with the babies and tease them until they howled. It ended with their death. Their ears and claws were attached to a piece of card, and when this was sent to the government with a claim, the reward was paid out. The wolves were so bold, they would sometimes come into our grounds and take a goose or a sheep from the herd. My pet goat (to whom I was very close) suffered such a fate. The herdsmen were able by shouting and with their dog to scare the wolf away, but the poor beast had already had its throat bitten through. Since horses and cattle were pastured in the summer nights, particular measures had to be taken against the wolves then. When the beasts came in in the evenings, they would be smeared with an evil-smelling oil, which was called 'French oil,' that was supposed to put off the wolves. The cattle got it on their heads and between their horns, since that was how they defended themselves, putting their posteriors together. And with the horses, it was the tails and hindquarters that were imbricated, because they put their heads together and used their hooves to try to keep away the wolves. Even then, I remember a horse being shown us one morning with its hindquarters so badly lacerated, it had to be put down."*

To me, the Berger farm in Sachrang felt similarly idyllic and equally fraught; in my case, this was brought on by the catastrophes, the turbulence, and the streams of refugees of the Second World War. Before I started going to school, I remember that my brother Till and I were set to mind the cows on the Lang farm. We boys were friends with young Eckart Lang, whom we called the Butter, because his brutal father always made him churn the butter. Minding the cows brought us our first income; it was next to nothing, but it reinforced our sense of independence. It's even possible that we earned money earlier than that when, at the same age, we lugged beer and lemonade up the Geigelstein with the draft pony. We fixed a crate of beer to one side and a crate of lemonade to the other, and climbed almost at

a trot up to the Alpine meadow above Priener Hütte. The difference in height from Sachrang is about eight hundred meters, and we were barefoot, because in summer we didn't wear shoes. There were shoes only in autumn and winter until the end of April; in the months without *r*, May, June, July, and August, we didn't have underwear under our lederhosen either. Today there's a road going up the mountain, but back then we scampered up a rocky path and, even so, got there in an hour and a quarter. Present-day tourists take four hours. By the Alpine meadow lived a family of cheese makers, among them a young woman called Mari. She was the only one of all of them who lived up there the year round; the story went that she would have nothing to do with the valley and the people down there since she had once fallen in love and been deserted by someone. When she was just one year old, her father had stuffed her in a rucksack and carried her up the mountain, and she had grown up there. She had been down to the valley only once in her sixty years of adulthood because her signature was required for something; I think it was pension payments. A few years ago, shortly before her death, I ran into her on the mountain with my younger son, Simon. She was past ninety and wild-looking and unkempt even though there were people looking after her. Young men from the mountain rescue service who had a hut nearby looked in on her most days. One of them would occasionally run a comb through her hair, and it did her good to have a strong young man fixing her hair. She stuck it out up there, summer and winter, rain and storms. Not long before my visit, her hut was buried under a great avalanche, and the mountain rescue service dug a tunnel perpendicularly down for several meters until they were able to pull out Mari from the almost undamaged stone hut. When I saw her, a heating system that would switch itself on and off automatically had just been installed in her hut by a wonderfully devoted man because once Mari had been found half frozen in her bed, and on another occasion, she had almost set herself alight with a twig fire. The local authorities in Aschau held detailed discussions about putting her in a home, but she steadfastly refused to go, and they finally decided to let her die where she had always lived. Mari dimly remembered the two boys who seventy years earlier had kept

coming up the mountain with the Haflinger draft pony. Sometimes, when the weather was bad, my brother and I had slept in the hay barn up on the mountain and set off very early the next morning because we had to return the horse and collect our fifty pfennigs before running to school.

Because the way up the Alp had sharp stones that were often hidden under bunches of grass, our feet were always bloodied and sore. In summer, plagued by thirst, we once forced our way into the cow shed on the Schreckalm, and my brother approached a cow to milk her. It was a young heifer, and she gave him such a kick that he came flying out backward. From my time in Sachrang, I can still milk a cow, and I recognize others who can as well, just as you can sometimes identify a lawyer or a butcher. My knowledge of milking came in handy many years later with the astronauts who made up the crew of one of the Space Shuttles. The background there was my fascination with the unmanned mission to Jupiter, which was proving incredibly difficult and had many reverses. The *Galileo* space probe was finally fired into deep space in 1989 after numerous delays and changes of plan. To attain the necessary velocity, the probe had to be sent around Venus and twice around Earth, the gravitational pull of both planets producing a kind of sling effect. The undertaking took all of fourteen years, and at the end of the mission, with the probe almost out of fuel, NASA made the decision in 2003 to steer it with the last of its power around one of the moons of Jupiter, then expose it to the gravity of the giant planet. In order not to contaminate the moon (Europa), which is covered over with a thick sheet of ice with a presumably liquid ocean below and possibly forms of microbial life, *Galileo* was sent into the gaseous atmosphere of Jupiter to burn up as ultraheated plasma. Almost all the scientists and technicians who had been engaged on the project assembled for the death journey of the probe at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, and I had got wind of it. I badly wanted to be there, because I knew that many of the participants would celebrate it with champagne, and as many, I could see, would go into mourning. I couldn't get approval to be there. I did manage to scramble over the wire fence outside but was unable to get past the guards at the entrance to the control

center. A physicist I think of with gratitude to this day recognized me as I was detained by the security staff and called NASA headquarters in DC. The bigwigs were in a meeting, and the man in charge of the group was called out after I had promised not to take up more than sixty seconds of his time. I was in luck. He had seen some of my films and gave the order: "All right, let the madman in with his camera." What especially impressed me on this day was the way almost everyone was in tears, and that when they could still receive the signals from the space probe loud and clear, it was suddenly announced that the mission was over. Even though signals continued to come in, it had been calculated in advance that the probe would continue transmitting for a further fifty-two minutes. That was how long the signals from the already defunct, incinerated thing were underway before they reached Earth.

This experience led me to make further inquiries. In an archive, I stumbled upon some wonderful 16 mm recordings that the astronauts had made during their Shuttle mission. I presume they were the only such recordings in that format; the rolls of film were still sealed in their original plastic from the lab; no one had thought to do anything with them. There had, of course, been video recordings of the launching of the probe in 1989, and there may have been 8 mm film before that, but this one crew included an astronaut with a particular interest and ability in film. Other crew members had had a go with the camera, but most of the material was his. I mention this man because he had shot film of extraordinary beauty that made a deep impression on me. He had been a test pilot on all existing types of USAF planes and had also captained a nuclear submarine.

His footage, I quickly decided, together with some shots under the Antarctic ice, should form the basis for my science fiction film called *The Wild Blue Yonder*. Or better, it could be used to make a story out of its own properties. I wanted the Shuttle astronauts to appear in the film—yes, they were all sixteen years older, but according to my plot, they had been traveling at such extraordinary speeds that some 820 years would have gone by in Earth time. Time was warped. They are coming to land on a depopulated planet.

It took a few months before I was able to meet them all at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. In a large hall, chairs had been set up in a semicircle, and the somewhat aged astronauts were sitting on them when I was introduced. I knew they were all distinguished scientists in their own right; of the two female astronauts, one was a biochemist, the other a medical doctor; one of the men was among the most distinguished plasma physicists in the country—all of them no-nonsense professional types. As I said hello to them, I could feel my heart sinking. How could I possibly recruit such personalities for a completely fantastical science fiction film? I told them in a few words about my origins in the Bavarian Alps and watched their expressions as I did. One of them, the pilot, Michael McCulley, had clear, strong features of the kind that are familiar from westerns. I said that, in fact, I wasn't a creature of the film industry at all but just someone who at the end of the war had learned how to milk cows. Even all these years later, I start to shake when I think of the odds, but I went on to tell them that in the course of my work with actors and faces I could often sense some of the things that lay beneath. I was, for instance, usually able to recognize people who could milk cows. I turned to McCulley and said: "For instance, you, sir, I am willing to bet you know how to milk a cow." He yelped, banged his thighs, and started miming milking. Yes, indeed, McCulley had grown up on a farm in Tennessee. I don't even want to think about the bottomless embarrassment I would have found myself in had I been wrong. But the ice was broken, and all the astronauts who appeared in the original 16 mm film agreed to appear in my own movie, aged by 820 years.

In Sachrang, we children learned how to tickle trout. Trout hide under stones when they sense humans, or they hang motionless under the overhanging grass of a riverbank. But if you reach for them cautiously with both hands then grab them firmly, it is possible to catch them. Often, because we were so hungry, we would catch one or two in the Prien River on the way to school, imprison them in shallow pools, and collect them on our way home. Mother would then fry them in the pan. I can still see them, freshly killed and heads off, bending in the pan. Sometimes they would

even jump about. Our lives were spent largely outdoors; our mother wouldn't think twice about putting us out for four hours at a stretch even in the depth of winter. As darkness fell, we would be standing gibbering at the door, all our clothes caked with snow. At precisely five o'clock, the door would be thrown open, and our mother would briskly sweep the snow off us with a twig broom before we were allowed inside. She thought fresh air would do us good, and we had a magnificent time, especially as there were hardly any fathers anywhere in the village, so everything was in the best sense anarchic. I was certainly delighted that we didn't have a drill-sergeant type in the house telling us what to do. We found out for ourselves without being told.

I recall a calf from the Sturm farm next door lying in the snow at the wood's edge, dead. At least half a dozen foxes were tugging at the body; at my approach, they fled. When my brother circled the dead calf, another fox suddenly leapt up out of the guts, pressed itself down to the ground, and slunk off. There is something low to the ground about foxes when they are taken by surprise. Much later, in 1982, when I was walking by myself around the periphery of Germany, I was heading into the wind along a forest path. I could suddenly smell a stink of fox, and when I turned a corner, I saw one slinking right in front of me. I had almost caught up to him, walking on tiptoe, when he spun round, crouched down with his hindquarters pressed to the ground, seemingly listened for his arrested heart to begin beating again, then ran off, still low to the ground.

It was only in stag mating season that we really had to be careful. A bicyclist was set upon by a furious stag and fled under a narrow bridge, pursued by the crazed animal. It took the clashing of some empty tin cans to drive him off. There were some eerie encounters. Once, in broad daylight—my brother is my witness—the whole slope behind the house was suddenly alive with weasels, all pouring downhill in the direction of the stream. I don't think it was a dream, although it's always a possibility. We had sometimes seen the odd one or two, but this must have been dozens. Lemmings are given to these mass movements, but never in my life did I hear of anything like this ascribed to weasels. A few of them fled between

the logs of a woodpile, and I went looking for them but couldn't find a single one. The surroundings were full of puzzles. On the far side of the stream, on the way to the village, there was a lofty forest of spruce, the so-called Fairy Forest that we were leery of going in. In a tight gorge behind the house was a waterfall with a pool partway down before it plunged into the river that was always full of clear water that was as cold as ice. Occasionally, tree trunks came down it, and that gave the spot some aura of jungle. I saw Sturm Josef—Sepp, we called him—bathing stark naked and scrubbing himself all over with a brush made from some root. He didn't seem to be a human figure, more like an ancient wodwo overgrown with lichen blowing in the wind.

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## MYTHICAL FIGURES

**S**turm Sepp is one of the mythical figures from our childhood. He worked on the Sturm farm next door, and he was bent forward at the hip like a ninety-degree hinge. To us, he was a giant of a man, a holdout from some gray unknowable past. He had a great gray shovel beard and usually an equally extensive pipe dangling from his mouth. We could tell from his bicycle how tall he must be if he were straightened out. The saddle was so much higher than the frame that only a giant could possibly reach the pedals from there. Sturm Sepp was silent. No one had ever heard him speak a word. On Sunday at the pub, his mug of beer was put down for him without his having to order it. We little ones pestered him, and on the way to school, when he was scything the pasture on the other side of the fence, hunched over like some primordial being, we called out: “Morning, Sepp!” and kept on trying to get a word out of him. One time, even though he seemed to be mowing perfectly placidly, he suddenly swung his scythe at Brigitte, the girl from the Berger farm, who was the closest to the fence, and caught her amidships. “Oi, you!” he called, his only verbal expression in decades. It was just as well that the point of the scythe struck the tin for her school lunch. From then on, though, we kept our distance. We calculated that the reason Sturm Sepp was so strong and so horribly doubled over was because in winter he would lug tree trunks down from the forest. Once, when his horse had broken down, he had shouldered a colossal tree, and from that day forth, he was bent double.

He was far from being the only mystery around. I'm not sure if this is a memory or not, but I seem to see the outline of a man standing by the stream behind the house as it got dark. Against the cold, he has lit a mighty fire, strong enough to paint his face scarlet. He is staring into the flames. Someone says he's a deserter fleeing into the mountains. Could I have remembered such a thing? Was I not too young? There was also a witch who came for me, but my mother caught up to her and snatched me back, and from that time on, I knew I wouldn't wet my pants anymore but get to the potty on time. On my right hand, I had a mark where the witch had bitten me. Then there was the night—which certainly happened—when our mother roused Till and me from our beds and wrapped us in blankets because it was still so bitterly cold outside. She climbed up the slope with us some way to a place where there was a view. "You've got to see this, boys," she said. "Rosenheim's on fire." Toward the end of the war, Rosenheim was set ablaze, as they said, by Allied bombers on their way back to their bases on the other side of the Alps, having been unable to make out their targets on account of bad weather. It was said they dropped their payload over the nearest enemy German city to lose some weight. I can still see before me what met my eyes as a child. At the end of the valley, to the north, the whole sky was red and orange and yellow, but there were no flickering flames, only a slow pulsing of the firmament, because Rosenheim, forty kilometers away, was embers. It was a vast inferno tracing the terrible pulse of the end of the world on the night sky. At the time, Rosenheim meant nothing to me, but from that moment on, I knew that outside of our tight valley there was a whole world that was dangerous and spectral. Not that I was afraid of it; I was curious to know it.

One riddle that still occupies me to this day was an airplane that spent a long time circling over the mountain behind the house, as though looking for something. Then, as we could clearly see, it dropped something shiny and mechanical, maybe aluminum. I can't remember if it was on a parachute or some kind of balloon. It was marked by a flag and seemed to drift from one treetop to the next. The people down in the valley could see it too, but because it was already getting dark, it wasn't until the next

morning that a search party of men set out to locate it. They were gone all day, and it was almost dark when they returned from the mountain. We were all dying to know what it was, but no one would tell us. Something mysterious had been found, but we weren't allowed to know what. Was it something of a military nature? Was it even from this world or another entirely?

The idyllic landscape of Sachrang had dangers of its own. Years after the war ended, we were still finding weapons that had been thrown away or hidden by fleeing soldiers. When Germany, completely surrounded, kept shriveling in the face of advancing Allied troops, there were only a very few tiny unoccupied enclaves remaining, one in Thuringia, I think, one in the north near Flensburg, and almost the last of them was Sachrang with Kufstein just across the border in Austria and the nearby Kaiser Mountains. A last few dispersed troops, but also groups of so-called werewolves who intended to conduct partisan operations after the end of the war, came this way, threw off their uniforms, and swapped them in return for civvies. They hid their weapons in hay heaps or woodpiles. I know from my mother that there was once a big kerfuffle on the Berger farm when American occupation soldiers found rifles in the big barn there. The farmer was threatened with shooting, and my mother, who spoke some English, intervened on his behalf. He hadn't, it seemed, known anything about the concealed arms. I myself found a submachine gun under a woodpile; I'm not sure if I fired it or not; I know I imagined going hunting with it. I had watched a road mender firing into a murder of crows on a field once, killing one. It was plucked and boiled in a big pot for soup. Because I was hungry, I joined the group of workers, and for the first time in my life, I saw a few globules of fat in the soup, quite a sensation. I was given none of the soup. Later, we children played around with carbide and made our own explosives. Setting off a detonation in a concrete pipe that ran under the road was the greatest feeling. We stood on the road above the pipe, and it felt distinctly peculiar to be lifted off our feet a little by the explosion. I can vaguely remember our mother assembling us, our friends as well, to watch her shoot through a thick beech log with her pistol. At the back side of it,

the wood was splintered, torn apart by the projectile. We were so blown away, there needed no speeches. We understood. From that moment on, it was clear that never in our lives would we aim a weapon, loaded or not, at a living person. We wouldn't even level toy guns at one another.

I belong to a generation that is perhaps unique in history. People in generations before mine have experienced great changes, say from a European world to the discovery of America or from the world of a craftsman to the industrialized age, but each was the experience of a single momentous transformation. I, though, got to witness and experience, even though I was no part of an agricultural civilization, how fields were mown by hand with scythes, how the grass was turned, how hay wains drawn by horses were loaded up with great two-tined hay forks, and the hay brought into the barns. There were lads who worked like serfs in medieval times. Then, for the first time, I saw a machine—still drawn by a horse—that turned and tossed the hay up in the air with two horizontal forks; I saw the first tractor and, to my amazement, the first milking machine. This was the transition to machine farming. Then much later I saw industrial farming being carried on in the vast fields of the American Midwest, where gigantic combine harvesters drove in formation over fields that were many miles across. No one disturbed these monsters, though each one still had a human driver. But they were digitally connected; each cockpit had several computer screens; and the steering was done automatically over GPS, which made it possible to draw perfectly straight lines. If a human had been steering them, there is no doubt there would have been irregular squiggles and the whole convoy would have been forced into ever wilder curves. The seeds themselves were genetically modified. Then not many years ago, I witnessed farming done by robots without any humans anywhere. The robots plant the seed in greenhouses, water it, control the light and heat, harvest and package the finished product for collection and sale in supermarkets.

I have experienced comparable transformations in the realm of communications, beginning with ancient times. I remember the man working for the mayor's office in Wüstenrot in Swabia, a few hours from

Munich and Sachrang, where my brother and I later lived for a year with our father. He was the town crier. There's an archaic German word for it. I heard him make his way through the village up to the Raitelberg, ringing his bell to get people's attention. Every three or four houses, he would stop and call out his "Hear ye, hear ye!" and announce official decrees and deadlines. From my early childhood, I knew what radio and newspapers were even though we didn't always have electricity, but I never saw a film. I had no notion of cinema. I didn't know such a thing existed until one day a man with a mobile projector came to us in our one-room village school in Sachrang and showed us a couple of films, which utterly failed to impress me. There was no telephone in the village; I made my first telephone call when I was seventeen. There were televisions only from the 1960s; it was in Munich that we first watched the news or a soccer game in the janitor's flat a floor above ours. I experienced the onset of the digital age, the internet, with content chosen for me not by human beings but by algorithms. I have received emails addressed to me by robots. The social media have essentially changed all forms of communication even though I make no use of them myself. Video games, surveillance, AI, there has never been such a cluster of radical changes in human history, and I can hardly imagine that future generations will experience such density of change in a single human lifespan.

Our childhood was archaic. We had no running water; we had to fetch it with a bucket from the pump, and in winter, it was often frozen. There was an outhouse with a privy, a piece of board with a hole in it. Because the outhouse, built up against the main house, wasn't insulated or even sealed, there were often snowdrifts in the toilet, so our mother put a bucket in the corridor. We used the bucket for a toilet, but when it got properly cold, all its contents froze to one solid clump. It was only in the kitchen that we could keep warm, where there was a wood-fired hearth. My mother's bedroom and the tiny six-by-six room off the kitchen where my brother and I slept in bunk beds were both unheated. We didn't have proper mattresses either. My mother couldn't afford them, so she made approximations herself. She filled rough burlap sacks with hay that she had made from

dried ferns. But the ferns, cut with a scythe, had sharp points where the stems were sliced at an angle. When they were dried, these points got as hard as sharpened pencils, and when we stirred in sleep, we kept waking up. Dried ferns also have a way of compacting into hard lumps in no time, and even violent shaking won't prevent them from clumping and setting as hard as concrete. These humps ensured that in all my childhood I never once slept on a flat surface. In winter it got so cold sometimes at night that our blankets, which we pulled over our heads, actually froze hard where we left room to breathe. The little chamber was so small that there was only room for a stool between the bunk beds and the far wall. Above the top bunk, right under the ceiling, was a board on which apples were kept. The room always smelled of those apples. They shriveled up in winter and froze as well, but once thawed out, they were still edible.

There was almost no medical care, and my mother, having a doctorate to her name, was persistently taken for a medical doctor despite repeated attempts to explain. She was a biologist; her supervisor was the future Nobel laureate Karl von Frisch; her thesis was on the hearing of fish. In the lab aquarium, she played tunes on her flute, to which the fish learned to respond, either fleeing or curiously coming to the surface, because after one of the tunes, there was food as a reward. She kept being called out in village emergencies. A boy next door, four years old, had stood up on tiptoe to take a big cauldron off the hearth, the cauldron tipped over, and boiling water scalded him from the point of his chin and his throat all the way down to his thighs. The burns were horrific, and my mother was called when the boy's heart had stopped beating. She was not squeamish and jammed an adrenaline injection between his ribs straight into his heart. He lived. Years later, he once took off his shirt in class and showed me his scarred upper body. There was a lot of infant mortality. On the Berger farm, Beni, the young farmer, and Rosel, his wife, lost one infant after the other right after they were born. They suffered from being in incompatible blood groups, a condition that an immediate mass transfusion can cure nowadays. Finally, they adopted a girl, the offspring of a soldier in the occupying forces, by the name of Brigitte. She was among the gang of children that played around

the Berger farm. I remember that Rosel fell pregnant again and gave birth to another child in Aschau and was driven home in a car. I wondered where the baby was. Then Brigitte came crying out of the farmhouse, plunged her head into the trough, and washed her face in cold water. That way I learned that this child too had died, the eighth one. Later, there was to be one son who lived, Benno, with whom I'm still in touch today. Brigitte became a waitress in a café in Aschau but died very young from breast cancer.

My brother Till and I grew up in extreme poverty, but we never even knew we were poor except perhaps in the first two or three years after the end of the war. We were simply always hungry, and my mother was unable to produce enough food for us. We ate salad from dandelion leaves; my mother made syrups from ribwort and fresh pine shoots; the former was more a house remedy for coughs and colds, and the latter stood in for sugar. Once a week, there was a longish loaf of bread from the village baker purchased with our ration coupons. With the point of a knife, our mother scratched a mark in it for each day, Monday to Sunday, allowing about a slice of bread for each of us. When hunger got to be very bad, we were each given a piece from the next day's ration because my mother hoped something might turn up in the meantime, but generally the bread was finished by Friday, and Saturdays and Sundays were particularly bad. My deepest memory of my mother, burned into my brain, is a moment when my brother and I were clutching at her skirts, whimpering with hunger. With a sudden jolt, she freed herself, spun round, and she had a face full of an anger and despair that I have never seen before or since. She said, perfectly calmly: "Listen, boys, if I could cut it out of my ribs, I would cut it out of my ribs, but I can't. All right?" At that moment, we learned not to wail. The so-called culture of complaint disgusts me.

Poverty was everywhere, and this didn't strike us as at all unusual except at certain rare moments. In the village school, with four classes taught simultaneously in one room, there were children from poor upland farms that were situated higher up the valley. One of them, Hautzen Louis, was invariably late every single day. I think he had to work in the cowsheds at home before it got light, which always made him late. In winter he came

bombing down the hill on a sleigh, and every day he was covered in snow from head to foot. Class was long since underway. Without a word, dragging the icy sleigh behind him into the classroom, he trudged past Fräulein Hupfauer, our teacher, and every day he had the same explanation: "Miss, I fell off." I don't remember his face, but one day in early summer, when Louis was sitting there in his jacket, which smelled of cowshed, and the teacher told him to take it off because it was far too warm, Louis pretended he didn't hear her. He failed to react to the ever-angrier admonitions of the teacher and finally got a rap on the knuckles with her cane. I have to say that Fräulein Hupfauer was a wonderful person, who, in spite of having four classes to teach at once, managed to instill knowledge and enthusiasm and curiosity and confidence in her charges. The cane was part of the regular accoutrements of the teacher and bothered no one. To us, it wasn't noteworthy that when we misbehaved we were made to kneel on the "naughty step" and when we misbehaved badly on a log of wood. Louis was still unwilling to take off his jacket, and all of us in the classroom, perhaps twenty-six children all told, girls and boys between six and ten, started to notice. That made his predicament worse, and he started silently sobbing. The silence of his crying still squeezes my heart today. Finally, Louis took off his jacket; underneath was the only shirt he owned. It was so worn and ragged that the sleeves hung in tatters off his shoulders. The teacher began to cry too and put the jacket back over him.

I saw Fräulein Hupfauer recently, seventy years later, at a class reunion in Sachrang. She had a different surname because she had married and been widowed in the meantime. But at well over ninety, she was still warm and enthusiastic. She had always believed when I was in her charge that I would have a distinguished life; my mother confirmed this to me several times after I was grown up. And yet, in my childhood, there was nothing to indicate anything exceptional except possibly in the negative. I was quiet, reserved, inclined to sudden outbursts of temper; in general, I was a danger to those around me. I was capable of silent brooding, for instance, because I wanted to understand why six times five came to the same thing as five times six. It even seemed to be a general principle, so eleven by fourteen

was the same as fourteen by eleven. Why? There was a law hidden in the numbers that I could not wrap my head around until I pictured a rectangle with rows of six pieces by five spread out in front of me, and if you turned the shape by ninety degrees, then the principle became visible. Even now I find mathematics thrilling, Riemann's hypothesis regarding the distribution of prime numbers, for instance. I don't understand the first thing about it because I don't have the mathematical equipment, but to me, it's the most significant of all open questions in mathematics. A few years ago, I met probably the greatest living mathematician, Roger Penrose, and asked him how he proceeded, whether by abstract algebraic methods or by visualizing the problem. He told me it was entirely by visualization.

But to return to myself as a child. There was something grim in me. I don't remember it, but I'm told I hit people with a stone in my hand more than once; my mother was worried about me. I was quiet and introverted, but there was something boiling inside me that might worry an adult. It took a family disaster for me to get my violent temper under control. I was probably thirteen or fourteen at the time and we were living in Munich when I got in a quarrel with my older brother, Till. We were as close as siblings can be and still are, but there were also terrible fights between us, furious punch-ups. This was thought to be natural and acceptable. But in one violent quarrel—the subject, as I recall, was the care of our pet hamster—I was so beside myself with fury, I laid into my brother with a knife. I struck him once in the wrist as he tried to fend me off and once in the upper thigh. In no time, the room was awash with blood. I was deeply shaken at my own behavior. Instantly, I understood that I would have to change my ways immediately and profoundly, and that this required a rigorous self-discipline. What had happened was simply too awful. I had caused the deepest possible rupture, which might have destroyed us as a family. In a brief family meeting, we decided, since the wounds were not on closer inspection grave, not to deliver my brother to the hospital to get him looked at, which would certainly have led to questions from the law. We bandaged him up, wiped the blood away, and I felt wretched. I still feel that today, to the bone. Because the wounds were never sewn up, Till's scars are clearly

visible still today. I got myself under control by means of absolute self-discipline. A good part of my character to this day is determined by sheer discipline. But between Till and me there still exists a rough, often jokey palling around, which sometimes makes our continued intimacy baffling to outside observers. A few years ago, we had a family reunion on the coast of Spain, where my brother was living at the time. At his invitation and expense, we had a wonderful evening at a fish restaurant. My brother, sitting beside me, put his arm around me as I studied the menu. Something began to smoke; I felt a light prick at my back, and suddenly I realized that with his cigarette lighter he had set my shirt on fire. I tore it off, and everyone was aghast, but the pair of us laughed loudly at the joke that didn't seem funny to anyone else. Someone lent me a T-shirt for the rest of the evening, and the little sore patch of skin on my back was cooled with a splash of prosecco.

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## FLYING

**F**rom when I was very young, I wanted to fly. Not in an airplane but by myself, with my body, without any gear. We were put on skis as infants, but in the Sachrang valley, there are no slopes worthy of the name. And so we started ski jumping, built ourselves ramps, and had amazing crashes. On one such crash, my brother landed with the points of his skis drilled so deeply into the snow that they stuck there, and he came out of both his boots. He tumbled down the rest of the way without skis or boots. A neighbor lad, Rainer, and I tried out another ramp outside the village. It seemed gigantic to us at the time, but when I look at it now, it seems tiny, paltry. We dreamed of one day becoming world champions and borrowed proper jumping skis. They turned out to be more than seven feet long, miles longer than we were, and they were wide too, with five rills grooved into the underside to keep the ski on course going down the ramp. This one had a natural approach; it was a natural slope, not an artificially constructed tower. Right at the top was a big pine tree that you could lean against at ninety degrees to the ramp, then, with the cumbrously overlong jumping skis, you pushed off into the icy twin tracks of the descent. Here, my friend had the most terrible mishap. I was standing on the slope below the ramp and watched him leap into the tracks. But he didn't get the skis properly inside them, and there was, of course, no way you could stop on the icy descent. I can still see him as though it were today, struggling all the way down the descent to get his skis into the tracks. But he spilled off headfirst into the woods. There were some rocks there as well. The sound of

the collision still shakes me even now. I found him with terrible head injuries, too bad for me to be able to describe them. I was convinced that he was either dead or would shortly die. He tried to speak, but the crash had knocked out all of his molars. It took long minutes that are hideous in my memory before he finally, by some kindly grace, lost consciousness. I found myself in a quandary, uncertain whether to run to the village for help, leaving him alone, or stay by him even though there was nothing I could do for him. I finally decided to carry him even though he was heavier than I was. It was a very steep slope down to the landing area. I was lucky, or rather he was, because a farmer came by with a pony and sleigh. My friend was delivered to the hospital; he was in a coma for three weeks or maybe less; he finally came around and recovered. He suffered no serious long-term damage except that most of his molars had to be replaced by silver dentures. In addition, he suffered from headaches all his life each time there was a change in the weather. Decades later, after we had completely lost touch, there was a curious sign of life from him. In the ZDF sports program called *Sportschau*, which screened highlights from German soccer league games, there was a feature called “Goal of the Month.” It must have been the beginning of the eighties; anyway, the goal that was chosen and played again in the show was selected on the basis of which of the short-listed candidates was chosen by the most viewers who wrote in on postcards. A studio celebrity selected one card from some two hundred thousand, and the lucky entrant got a free trip and a pair of tickets to the next Germany game. The postcards lay there in great mailbags in a semicircle on the studio floor, and the guest reached into one and pulled out a card. The name of the lucky winner was read out: Rainer Steckowski, Sachrang. The sheer statistical improbability is so staggering that no one will believe me, but I remember the moment. My dream of ramps and flying was already over at a stroke with Rainer’s accident. It was many years before I wanted to go anywhere near a ski jump again.

Later, in 1973, I made a film about ski jumping called *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner*. I had by then watched downhill races and ski jumping many times on television. At the ski jump on Kulm in Austria, one

of the most imposing sites in the world, I even took photographs in a large black-and-white format with an ancient-seeming mahogany camera, using a tripod, a squeeze bulb, and plates. To adjust the focus, I had to disappear under a black cloth the way nineteenth-century photographers did. Among the hundreds of professional photographers with modern cameras and huge telephoto lenses, I provoked astonishment even though I wasn't there to catch the athletes in full flight like the others but at the moment *before* they plunged into the tracks when there was no more going back. In all of them there lurked a secret dread, but no one talks about it; at the most they'd pay lip service to "respecting the ramp." And it's never the athletic musclemen who fly away from the pack; usually it's seventeen-year-olds with pale pimply faces and an unsteady gaze. I first noticed one such person in 1970 —Walter Steiner, a Swiss woodcarver and artist who lived and worked in Wildhaus in the canton of Appenzell. Sometimes he would go up into the mountains all alone and shape fallen trees into strange faces, usually with an expression of terror on them, but he kept the places secret for climbers or hikers to stumble upon. When he started entering international contests, he always finished way behind the competition, but I saw something in him that impressed me. This quiet young man had something ecstatic in the way he flew, though technically he still had flaws. I told my friends: "This is a future world champion." His shape was unusual too; he was very tall and thin, with legs that were far too long; he seemed clumsy on the ground, like a crane picking around on bony legs with knobbly knees, but once airborne —he sailed like a crane. His element seemed to be the air, not the earth.

At that time, I had seen a few films on television in a series called *Grenzstationen*, or *Borderline Situations*, that featured people in extreme predicaments. These films stood out from the usual run of TV offerings, and I noticed they all came from the same broadcaster, the Süddeutscher Rundfunk in Stuttgart, and that one editor was responsible for them all. His name was Gerhard Konzelmann and he was for a long time the Middle East correspondent for the Erstes Programm. I often saw him on the news, a stout man with a slight Swabian accent who sent in incredibly good bulletins from all over the Middle East. He sweated profusely and looked a

little unhappy in that desert climate, but at the same time, he was more clear-sighted than anyone else. I remember how in 1981 the Erstes Fernsehen broadcast a breaking news special report from Cairo; Konzelmann to camera; behind him was a stage with upset chairs, soldiers, confusion, chaos. Only moments earlier, in the course of a military parade, some soldiers had leapt down from a convoy of trucks, sprinted up to the platform, and shot President Sadat. Eleven other guests on the rostrum had been killed, and there were many injured. Konzelmann improvised a report on what had just happened; it was by no means even certain that the shooting was over or if Sadat was still alive; he had been taken away by security forces. Calm, concentrated, and sweating, Konzelmann gave the best analysis of the inner contradictions of the Egyptian state that I have ever heard and reported on the origins and role of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the probable force behind the assassination. So this was the man I had called up a few years before over the documentary series he was producing and had gone to meet in the canteen in Stuttgart. I had a film in mind that would fit perfectly into his series, and Konzelmann, during our lukewarm lunch, immediately came on board. The disadvantage of it for me was that his series was not given an anonymous off-air commentary; each of the filmmakers had to appear as the narrators of their films, and speak to camera. So I would have to appear. I resisted the idea for a long time, but it led to my never leaving my voice-over to some speaker or other but each time recording it myself. This was a step the full gravity of whose implications I did not see right away. It led to my finding my voice, my stage voice, if you like.

The Konzelmanns of the world are no longer with us. Decisions nowadays are made by committees, and ratings are everything. When I was working on the cutting of a feature film, my editor, Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus, always fixed up the cutting table in the morning and lined up the little rolls of film on shelves for the work of the day ahead; while she was doing that, I would usually read her small news items from the newspaper; among them, on several successive days, were reports from the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, where a volcano, La Soufrière, had given

increasingly menacing signs of an imminent eruption or even explosion. The geological structure of the volcano indicated that the entire summit was likely to blow off before the lava could emerge. Therefore, the entire southern end of the island had been hurriedly evacuated, some seventy thousand inhabitants, but evidently one man, a poor Black peasant, had refused to be evacuated. He surely had some unusual and, to me, unfamiliar understanding of death, which interested me. I casually mentioned that one surely ought to make a film of the volcano with him. Toward lunchtime, Beate switched off the cutting table, turned to me, and said out of the blue: “Well, why not?”

“Why not what?” I asked.

“Why don’t you go there and make the film?”

I called Süddeutscher Rundfunk and asked to speak to Konzelmann, but he was at a meeting of all the regional broadcasting stations. I asked for permission to put one question to him. Someone slipped him a note, and Konzelmann came to the phone. “Short and sweet,” he said. I told him in thirty seconds what was going on in Guadeloupe and asked him if he’d commission such a film. “All right,” he said. “Off you go, but I want you back alive. The bureaucracy’s too slow; we’ll do the contract afterward.” Two hours later, I was on my way to the West Indies. Konzelmann left the station before retirement age, I think, to write an opera. He had always composed the music for his own films.

I felt such an immediate kinship with Walter Steiner. At the traditional *Vierschanzentournee Tournee*, or Four Hills Tournament, at the end of 1973 and the beginning of 1974, he was way back in the field because he was still struggling with an injury, a broken rib. When people wondered if I was backing a lame horse, I kept faith. I told him at the ski-jumping event at Planica in Slovenia that he would trounce the others. Perhaps that gave him confidence, but it was more than that; often, moments of physical closeness proved critical in my work with actors or the subjects of my documentaries. With Bruno S., the lead in two of my films, *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* and *Stroszek*, there were moments when he became agitated at the dreadfulness of the world he had experienced in his childhood and youth. I

would grip his wrist, and that calmed him down. The day before his event, Steiner was depressed and worried about his form. I had four camera people there, and on our way out to the place he was staying, I gave a signal and we all together hoisted him onto our shoulders and carried him down the lonely snowy street at shoulder height. Someone took a blurry photograph of it; I found it the other day. But the moment itself I remember with great precision because it was a simple physical gesture that confirmed our trust in one another. The following day, at the early practice sessions, Steiner was extraordinary. No one had ever soared as he did then. In his photograph album, I found a not terribly eye-catching shot of a raven that he didn't want to talk about, dismissing it with a casual remark. But after he had been hoisted onto my shoulders, he began to talk. When he was ten or thereabouts, he had found a young raven that had fallen from its nest, and with great care, he raised it himself. The raven survived and, because Steiner was a bit of a loner, it became his best friend. The bird liked to sit perched on the boy's shoulder. At the end of the school day, the bird would be waiting for him in the branches of a tree, Steiner would whistle, and his raven would come flying down and sit on his shoulder as the boy bicycled home. But his raven started moulting and was attacked and bullied by other ravens, and it was hard to watch. Finally, Steiner could bear it no longer, and he shot his raven with his father's hunting rifle. Now that his raven no longer flew, he, Steiner, flew in its stead.

In Planica, Steiner was so extraordinary that he several times almost flew to his death because the ramp was not built for a flyer like him. To explain: when the skier jumps, he lands on a steep downward slope and the kinetic energy is tapered off. Even dramatic-looking falls are usually not too bad. But if, following an extra-long jump, one were to land on the flat, which no one has reckoned on, then the deceleration is instantaneous, just as a jump from a twentieth-story window onto a paved road is deadly. The vast ramp at Planica and almost all other ramps in existence had a sector-shaped radius that goes rapidly from steep to level. Where the radius begins is the critical point on the course, and it is always marked by a red line on the snow. If a jumper flies past that point, the technical people responsible

are obliged to interrupt the competition immediately and carry on with a shorter descent so the jumpers will no longer breach the red line. Steiner, however, sailed so far past the critical point that he broke the existing world record by about ten meters. There were no more measuring boards where he landed. The compression was so powerful that the violence of his landing caused him to crash-land.

He suffered a concussion, and for an hour, he didn't know where he was and what had happened. But in the course of the two remaining days of the competition, the Yugoslav judges four times allowed him to start from too far back and fly into the death zone. They wanted to see the new world record and damn the consequences. The ski-jumping event drew fifty thousand spectators. "They want to see me bleed; they want me smashed to little pieces," said Steiner. He won the event with the greatest lead ever recorded. Steiner then demanded—he now had the authority to do so—that the courses be redesigned; above all, he insisted on a differently calculated mathematical curve in the transition from slope to level. Today, so far as I know, none of the great courses have a sector-shaped level but have instead a curve calculated from Fibonacci numbers—in other words, like part of the spiral curve that one sees in fossilized ammonites. The curve is far longer, so it's no longer possible to fly straight down onto level ground.

Today's ski-jumping events are normed, synthetic events in contrast to the days of Steiner's ecstasy. The profiles of the slopes are adapted to the ballistic curves of the jumpers; no one ever flies as high as the treetops but stays relatively low to the slope. In Steiner's time, no one wore crash helmets and there were no suits like today's either. Everything has been calculated down to the last millimeter now, like the suit's distance from shoulders to crotch relative to the size of the athlete because too low a crotch would be something like carrying an additional sail. The air permeability between front and back is measured by committees because, at the time of the Innsbruck Winter Olympics, the Austrian team introduced suits whose backs were almost airtight, which resulted in the formation of a kind of artificial hunchback that had the effect of wings. I think all the gold medals that year went to Austria. The most clearly visible difference is in

the body position of the jumpers. Today they all go with their skis in a V shape, which makes for stability and superior aerodynamics. Steiner in his day jumped with skis parallel and close together because the judges gave points for that. It had been known for a long time from wind-tunnel experiments that the V shape had advantages, and all at once, a solitary Swede started jumping like that. His name is Jan Boklöv, a stubborn visionary character. He was marked down by the judges at every event, but he carried on incorrigibly and so has earned his own place on my list of secret heroes. The next winter, some jumpers copied him, and before long, they were all at it, and the entire system of judges and points had to be revised. The skis we borrowed as kids were not nearly as wide or as flexible as eagle feathers in the air, and we didn't have ski fastenings that allowed you to lift your heel right out. With all that, the competitors fly through the air horizontally, riding on a pillow of air, and in the case of the very boldest of them, you can see their ears literally between the points of their skis.

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## FABIUS MAXIMUS AND SIEGEL HANS

**M**y heroes have a lot in common. Fabius Maximus, who is mocked to this day as a *cunctator*, or delayer, but who saved Rome from Hannibal's Carthaginian army; Hercules Seghers, a painter of the early Rembrandt era who was barely noticed but is considered the father of modernity and made paintings of a kind that would not be seen for several centuries. Or Carlo Gesualdo, the Prince of Venosa, who composed music fully three hundred years ahead of its time—I'm thinking here principally of his sixth book of madrigals—not until Stravinsky, who went on pilgrimages to Gesualdo's castle, did we hear such sounds again. Also included is Pharaoh Akhenaton, who introduced an early form of monotheism half a millennium before Moses. After his death, his name was expunged from all temples, buildings, and steles. He was rubbed off all lists, and his statues smashed to rubble. I arranged an installation on Hercules Seghers for the biennial at the Whitney, which was later shown at the Getty; I made a film called *Gesualdo: Death for Five Voices*; and there were a few short-lived plans for a film on Akhenaton.

At the Cannes Film Festival, sometime in the mid-seventies, the Lebanese French producer Jean-Pierre Rassam, who had just completed *La Grande Bouffe* in a crazy race against time, proposed that we make a film together. “But what subject?” he asked. “Akhenaton,” I replied. Thereupon the producer emptied our just-opened bottle of champagne on the tiled floor, declared it to be flat, and ordered another. Champagne at the Carlton was criminally expensive. We touched glasses to the project, which I was

already certain was completely unfeasible. “How much money do you want,” he asked, “to start on the preparations?” I said: “A million dollars,” whereupon he pulled out his checkbook and wrote out a check for a million dollars. At that stage, he had already gone broke several times; he took drugs, and not many years later, he, in fact, died of an overdose. But he was a wild, productive man, and I loved him. I never cashed the check. For years I kept it pinned above my desk to look at; the check had a longer life than poor Rassam.

The most important of all my heroes, though, was the Siegel Hans. In Bavarian dialect, we put the definite article before the name and the family name before the given name. It’s the way the Hungarians do it too. Siegel Hans was named after the farm where he lived; I don’t know his actual surname to this day. He was a young and incredibly strong woodcutter who delighted us all with his boldness. In one unforgettable fight in the village pub, he got the better of Beni, the young farmer from the Berger farm. Beni had a trunk like an oak tree, and for years no one dared to call him out. Then one day in the pub, Siegel Hans provoked him, and the innkeeper pushed the two of them out into the gents’ because he didn’t want his bar to come to harm. Some people wanted to separate the pugilists, but most were in favor of letting matters take their course. “Leave them to it,” they pleaded, “then we’ll finally see which one’s stronger.” There, in the bathroom, whither all the male clients had followed, battle was joined, and Hans finally won. He got Beni in a headlock and rammed his head into a newly installed china pissoir. Or maybe it was a toilet bowl and that part of the story is apocryphal because I can remember pissing against a tin wall with a metal gutter for drainage. At any rate, Hans rammed Beni so forcefully against the bowl that his brow was ripped open and hung down over one eye. “Yer had enough now? Yer had enough now?” Hans kept saying to Beni before ramming him into the toilet again until, bleeding profusely, Beni called it quits. We lads heard about this with amazement. For us, Hans had already been deified when one day the milk truck caused the bridge at the back of the Berger farm to collapse. It was a narrow wooden bridge, and only the truck’s front wheels had made it across to the

far side; it looked as though it were trying desperately to hang on with both hands. Everything else had slumped into the streambed along with the wreckage of the bridge. Horses were sent for to tow the truck with its heavy tank of milk, but this wasn't even attempted because the thing probably weighed ten tons. Someone suggested getting Siegel Hans because he owned a caterpillar tractor. This was something resembling a small tractor, only it ran on caterpillar tracks like a tank. It was usually used for dragging heavy tree trunks out of the forest. But after Hans had been brought to the site of the mishap, he took a quick look at the damage and remarked that his vehicle wasn't powerful enough for this. We boys had an inkling of what was coming next. Hans climbed down into the stream and began by pulling off his shirt. I presume now with the wisdom of hindsight that this was to show off his extraordinary muscles. He looked like the fellows who nowadays compete for the title of Mr. Universe. Hans bent down and picked up the back end of the truck; and with all the strength in him, he tried to do the impossible. The mere effort delighted us. His muscles bulged; his carotid artery swelled; his face turned purple. Then he gave up the magnificent effort. The next day a crane was deployed, and it finally managed to hoist the milk truck out of the stream.

Siegel Hans was involved in all the smuggling in Sachrang, and everyone there smuggled. The border to Tyrol was no more than half a mile away. My mother would take me and my brother over the border, buy some cheap fabric, and wrap it around us underneath our clothes. On the way home, I looked like a little Michelin Man even though I was just four years old, but the customs guards turned a blind eye to us because they felt sorry for our poverty. From my mother's stories, I already knew about a few of Siegel Hans's rousing deeds. Once, he had smuggled in a barrel of butterfat strapped onto his back and almost walked into a night patrol in the mountains. To steer clear of them, he climbed down a sheer rock face but lost his way on the rocks. Not until late the next morning did he find his way out of the face, but because the sun had long since risen, the solid contents of the barrel had melted and kept slopping out as he climbed. It was possible to follow his steps many days later through the broad traces of

lard. But his most exciting action was something we witnessed ourselves. At issue were some five tons of contraband coffee, as we were informed much later. At any rate, word had got out, and one night the police were on their way to arrest Siegel Hans. He was able to escape out of a window. All he had on him was his trumpet, and the next morning when it got light, he blew down on his trumpet from the Spitzstein. The police gave chase, but by the time they got to the summit, he was blowing from the cloven top of the Mühlhorn or the peak of the Geigelstein on the other side of the valley. The police, humiliated, called up more and more reinforcements, but Hans continued tooting at them from peak to peak. We heard him. We saw troops of police running through the valley and up the slopes, but neither they nor the officials stationed at the pass got a glimpse of him. He was like a phantom. We children knew why they couldn't catch him. As far as we were concerned, he had run from the Spitzstein all along the border heading into the sunset until he had run right around the whole of Germany to the Geigelstein on its east-facing side. It was the only way he could avoid having to go down into the valley. Twelve days later, he surrendered to the police, but by then, he had a mythic status among his admirers. Not many years ago, the Bayerischer Rundfunk made a film about Siegel Hans, and that made it clear to me that he almost died under the terrible conditions in the Kufstein Fortress where he was imprisoned.

Many years later, when a large part of the political establishment in Germany had given up any idea of reunification, I had the thought of following the border around my own country. I can remember an official declaration from Willy Brandt to the effect that for him "the book of German reunification" was now closed. At that time, he was following a politics of "small steps," which meant aligning the socialist GDR with the West by means of small, practical, mostly economic measures. There was a certain logic too in improving the lives of the GDR inhabitants; it was in this way that one of my greatest cameramen, Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein, was freed from his prison in East Germany. A few days after they had started building the Wall in 1961, he had been caught entering the GDR with a valid second passport for his fiancée to get her out. In a show trial, he had

been accused of working for the CIA because they had been able to prove that he had once worked for a couple of weeks as an assistant cameraman for Sender Freies Berlin, which was partly financed by the Americans. The charge was attempted human trafficking in the interests of the class enemy. Jörg refused to disclose his fiancée's name. To soften him up, he was made to spend half a year in the "hot room" in Bautzen in a cell through which the heating pipes ran. He was finally sentenced to five years in prison, but after just three and a half, he was allowed to go in exchange for a wagonload of butter. What I found oppressive at the time was the way that a lot of intellectuals, the writer Günter Grass among them, had vehemently opposed the idea of German reunification. For that reason, I heartily detested him. The fact that shortly before he died Grass confessed to having been in the SS didn't surprise me, but I had some admiration for his courage in dealing with his past. I thought only its poets would be able to keep Germany together. I wanted to make a loop around Germany, to hold it together like a belt. I started off at the Ölberg Chapel outside Sachrang on the Austrian border and climbed the Spitzstein as Siegel Hans had done, and from there, as he did, I would follow the border west until, at the end of my tour of the country, I would circle around on the eastern side of the Geigelstein.

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## ALONG THE BORDER

All that's left of my notes are a few excerpts that exist in a fair copy I happened to make some time ago. The rest of the original disappeared somewhere along the way. I started on my long march on June 15, 1982; thereafter the manuscript contains no dates.

*From the Ölberg Chapel next to the customs post, I walked through the beautiful, lofty woods toward Sachrang, which was soon lost from view as I climbed quickly up past Mitterleiten. A construction machine was grinding gravel. Next to it was a brick structure that will never be completed. At Mitterleiten I was overtaken by a local on a motorbike; I knew who he was, but he didn't recognize me when I said hello. I climbed quickly, but my heart was heavy. At the place where builders' rubble was dumped into the woods; where the trucks drive their loads of crushed roof tiles through the trees; where the storm wind tugs at the great sheets of plastic, but they are held down like dead bodies by stones; where timid ducks, who must have been through some experiences in the ugly little gravel pool of the never-completed excavation, flew away from me; at that point, after long blundering about in my past, I left my beloved Sachrang, where I had grown up, and climbed in cool rain now and greater haste uphill through dripping grass and yarrow. The meadows smelled of hay, and I looked across the valley in the direction of the Geigelstein, where, much later, I hoped to be returning. Then I was seized by a confident*

*conviction that reached from border to border and horizon to horizon. Siegel Hans was blaring on his trumpet and quickening my step. His trumpet was a slender wisp of a thing, incredibly valuable—over decades of labor, it had been cut by a master craftsman from a rock face that wasn't rock but a mighty emerald.*

*As I climbed higher toward the alpine hut on the Spitzstein, a solitude seemed to embrace the land very gently, perhaps in the way that a large and powerful animal carefully lies down. The landlord watched me through his binoculars for the better part of an hour as I climbed toward him—an exotic creature—me—an inhabitant of another galactic world.*

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*I left Mittenwald almost at a jog-trot. I have never seen such a degradation of landscape. Level sanded footpaths as in city parks, confected nature trails, signs pointing out dangers with the inevitable footnote that the community takes no responsibility for anything. The Watzmann peak stood in pale evening light, its rocks seeming to cool by the minute. The Watzmann is an insistent mountain. Silence descended on the woods. On a pond in the moor, two wild ducks swam like ancient dreams. Walking beside a tall deer fence, I suddenly ran into an almost industrial site for deer, with great cribs full of hay, salt licks, observation posts, and a somewhat crude hut. On a meadow in front of the woods, two young stags and a female were grazing; they looked and sniffed appraisingly for a moment. Who was this then? Stranger that I was, even to myself, they didn't know. Herzog, I introduced myself, at your service, whereupon in a few majestic bounds they vanished into the woods.*

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*I saw fields of ice stretching out ahead of me as far as the glaciers and the icy points of the Svalbard archipelago. They came closer and*

*turned into actual reality. I slipped, skidded under the rails of the iced balcony of a baroque palais, and fell into the yawning depths of glacier tongues, which suddenly broke off in front of me into the Elbe. It was the Elbe, or it was the Siberian Yenisei, I couldn't be sure. With the sudden shock, I saw my fall as my death, but tumbling through the air, I still had the presence of mind to spread my arms like a parachutist following the others of his unit so, by directing my fall some hundreds of yards farther on, I avoided the sharp edge of the ice and fell instead into the icy waters of the Elbe, which unfortunately carried no water but . . .*

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*There were bells ringing in the depths. The mountains are full of silent ceremony. On a bench sat an old man asleep in the afternoon sun. "Well . . . well," he was saying in his sleep, and a little later, "No, really . . . well." GERMANY IS BIGGER THAN ANY FEDERAL REPUBLIC was written in felt tip, almost worn away by the weather, on a sign next to the sleeper's bench that had been put there to mark the frontier.*

*In the Krinner-Kofler hut, I spent a long time talking to a retired schoolmaster from Münsterland. In answer to my questions, he told me how the war had ended for him. I wanted to hear about its final moments. In Holland, he told me, the Canadians were advancing with armor a mere hundred yards away. In accordance with his orders, and by now behind the line of enemy tanks—they had passed him already on the road—he had just taken some Dutch prisoners on a farm. He had to level his sidearm at his superior; it was the only way of preventing the man from shooting them. Then, with his Dutch prisoners, and his superior, and with just a few bushes between him and the Canadians rolling along the paved road, he had to rough it back to his own fortifications before the enemy arrived. And there he and his prisoners were finally captured.*

*The feebleminded son of the forester in the lodge next door turned up, and with strange noises from his strange insides, he first tugged at me, then at a clever-looking hunting dog. We both let him do it. Later on, the boy followed me over to the hut of the Alpine Club, where I was just getting my few things together, and he helped himself to my last chocolate bar. I let him take it, as he had his eyes on my field glasses and notebook as well, and since I had let him help himself to a small sample of my possessions without fuss, evidently sufficiently pleased with his acquisitions, he contented himself with lying down on the things he would surely have liked to take.*

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*Steep descent to the Bayer Alp, several squalid houses in a small hollow. This marks the beginning of the forest path to Wildbad Kreuth. All at once, after it had been raining for quite some time on my descent, it got pitch-dark, as though a storm of biblical dimensions were on its way. I took shelter on a bench under the overhanging roof of an empty hut and didn't have long to wait before a violent tempest raced up the narrow valley, sweeping gray and white shreds of mist into the tossing trees. When it got worse, and I supposed the tempest was at its height, something else came that made everything else look like a trivial beginning. From the sheer cliff face opposite, foaming white waterfalls came down, and everything was swaddled in white racing clouds that shredded and briefly showed the tops of trees then sped away in panic flight along the slope. Like a curtain tearing itself to shreds, the view was opened onto frothing and furious white waterfalls and streams of water that a moment ago had not existed. The storm struck like the rage of God on an infidel. I had to wait a long time for the worst to be over, staring into the incredible fury and knowing that I was the only witness to it. In the strangely depressed state in which I found myself, the idea of going down into the valley, away from my border, and into human*

habitation seemed unendurable, so I chose the way west, steeply up into the mountains, even though the rain had not yet abated. I started the daunting ascent alongside a raging torrent. The path had turned into a waterfall that got heavier the more I climbed. Before long, I found myself surrounded by clouds. Up at the Wildermann col, the horizon suddenly cracked open, irradiated by yellow-orange rainlight. Vales and peaks and woods appeared looking strangely vulnerable far into the mountains, like a great promise held out to a thirsting people, while behind me an uncertain white sheet of fog boiled up out of the depths. Then, with impeccable theatricality, the stage closed behind me. I spent the evening in the hut talking to the multiple white-water champion of Germany in the fifties, who told me about his life as an athlete in the postwar era. When he was in training, and on his own, he would often cry from hunger.

Balderschwang. I left the holidaymakers behind me with their swing seats and pergolas, and climbed higher into the mountains; it was late already; a drizzle set in. Where to sleep? I was hiking with very little in the way of baggage, no tent or sleeping bag. For a long time, two cows pursued me through the paddocks, as though they hoped to hear something to their advantage. "You are no cows," I said to them. "You are princesses." But that wasn't enough for them; they wanted to hear more. Not until I crossed a rainy, spotty, snowy field did they finally give up. Up at the ski lift, the view of Germany was vast and somehow monstrous. The valleys and foothills with farms and occasional hamlets receded deep into the flattening landscape against a haze of distant orange. To the west, in mild silver light slowly turning to reddish gold, lay Lake Constance. Looming above everything, pale storm clouds, and far in the west, as in old paintings, angled reddish beams of the declining sun piercing through streaks of rain. A pallid, shadowless light now settled indifferently over dark silver woods and light silver fields. In that level gleam, Germany looked to me as though it were under water. It was a submissive sort of country. I sat down. Hunting swallows jagged here

*and there. Germany seemed undecided, frozen perhaps, as though the performance of a new composition had just ended and the audience doesn't trust themselves to applaud because no one is quite certain that it is the end. I could feel the moment, but it felt as though it were spread out over decades and Germany inextricably tangled up in it. There it was under me, this un-place, just as there is uncouthness and unavailingness. Could it be that my own country felt homeless within its own boundaries but was still clinging on to the name Germany?*

*Lake Constance. People went well sated to bed. A swan crossed from here to there. In two world wars, Germany exposed all its secrets. I wished I could be in the company of monks at vespers, a godless guest.*

*Stein am Rhine. Behind the town I saw the powerful river, the swans, the wooden barges; I was in another century. I plunged both arms into the water, leaned down, and drank. You can drink the Rhine, you know. I ate some bread.*

*Strasbourg. In Strasbourg I sat on a bench; after a while, a polite Algerian sat next to me. A little later, a second Algerian came with a white plastic bag; he shook hands with his friend, then, of course, with me as well. I was stirred. I had crossed into France. Across the Rhine was Germany, like a figment of someone's imagination. In Strasbourg Cathedral, silent motorcyclists walked down the silent nave, only their leathers creaking. They carried their helmets under their arms like medieval knights. At night, the cows I shared my field with moaned in their dreams.*

*In the morning, very early, I woke with a start. I could feel nothing, Germany was gone, everything was gone, it was as though I had suddenly lost something that had been entrusted to me the evening before—or as though someone who was standing watch for an entire army suddenly turned out to have been blinded and the army is unprotected. Everything was gone, and I felt completely blank, without pain or pleasure or desire. Nothing was left. I was like*

*a castle that had no knights in it. The shock did me good. Purple imaginings settled over me.*

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*I can't remember passing through Wrede, although I know I must have done. I found a flattened Coke can, which must have already been through a couple of winters because it was ivory instead of red. All over, heavy curtains had been drawn; no one was looking for change or liberation. The latest thing to happen was this: a ladies' group had decided in their ripe old age to learn the trade of butchery, and to prove they were serious, they set a moped on fire outside the nearest bar. From the border, where I was standing, I looked across the hills to Germany, which seemed to bear the silence in cramped and painful but barely perceptible twitchings. The moon was supposed to have risen, but it was nowhere to be seen. The world seemed immense, measured against itself. I lit my lighter, and in my unease, I wrote my own name on the inside of my watch strap. I slept on a hillside under the stars. A few hours later, still night, I got up, troubled by the lights down in the valley and the stars overhead, and vomited. In the small hours, I fell asleep, but then it started to get light. The sun was about to rise. Overhead, on a bough, I could hear a bird shaking itself out and tidying its plumage. After that, it started singing. I got up. Germany before dawn looked unredeemed, its torn fields staring up at the expressionless sky.*

I never completed my walk around my country. After more than one thousand kilometers, I got sick and had to go to the hospital for a few days. Today, with hindsight, I realize I would never have been allowed to walk around the GDR because the police wouldn't let you walk along the Baltic shore. There were too many fugitives setting off for Sweden or Denmark in rowboats and inner tubes. The fall of the Berlin Wall, which I took to be the signal for reunification, is indelibly etched in my memory. I was filming in

Patagonia at the time, working on my film *Scream of Stone*. We were in a remote spot far from any form of civilization, but a mountaineer had got wind of the happening on his shortwave radio a few days after and told me the news in the middle of the filming. I can still feel my deep sense of joy. We ended the shoot early, and I drank Chilean wine with the team. For me, Germany and Bavaria are only a seeming contradiction. First, Germany was never shaped in the crucible of history, and second, Bavaria isn't anything my family has been associated with over the generations. But even if my family has other roots in Europe, in terms of culture, I am a Bavarian. Bavarian is my first language; the landscape is my landscape, and I know where home is.

On foot, and often barefoot at that, I was always on the go in Sachrang and the mountains around. Later on, that acquired a different quality with my conversion to Catholicism and my hiking with a group of religiously minded contemporaries on the border of then Yugoslavia and Albania. I will have more to say on that later. But walking became more important and more explicit in connection with my grandfather Rudolf, my father's father; I had the sense of walking in his landscapes. I was closer to him than to my actual father. I think it all had to do with the way the turn-of-the-century generation had deeper historical roots than the generation of my parents, who quit the continuum of European culture when they opted for National Socialism. They descended into a vague Germano-mystical archaism and went under with it. Perhaps I am being too subjectively concentrated on my own family here. Families are strange creatures, and mine is no exception. In addition, there is the circumstance that I knew my grandfather only when he was already insane.

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## ELLA AND RUDOLF

**M**y grandmother relates their meeting in the memoirs she wrote for the benefit of her curious grandchildren. There, I learn that my grandmother enjoyed a positively idyllic girlhood in comfort and serenity. The very first sentence speaks of “*a lovely, blissful time.*” The house where she grew up had “*an enormous balcony overlooking the garden in the direction of the city walls and the promenade.*” A look at a map of Frankfurt will tell you that such a situation is completely unimaginable nowadays. In the middle of the city, there were fruit trees and currant and raspberry bushes.

“*We took particular delight,*” my grandmother recalls, “*in a large and beautiful pear tree next to the pergola. Along the wall was a vine, with the grapes tied in loosely woven linen bags to keep them from the greedy blackbirds. In front of the terrace, access to which was through the garden room, was a round fountain in the middle of which a putto held up the head of a goose, from whose beak a stream of water burbled. Each spring, we put in a lot of ornamental goldfish. Grandpa was surprised at the way their numbers diminished with the months and suspected the cats until one morning, getting up even earlier than his wont, he spotted a stork taking his breakfast.*”

Such affluence is almost unimaginable to me, and the idea of a stork fishing for goldfish in my grandmother’s fountain in the middle of today’s metropolitan Frankfurt is completely impossible. But my grandmother Ella said goodbye to all that when she married my grandfather and went to live

and work with him on the impoverished island of Cos—a Turkish possession then, today Greek. Her meeting with my grandfather had been long prepared. Her father had nursed his father-in-law through his last couple of years after a succession of strokes. To repay him for his devoted nursing, he was sent on a Mediterranean cruise, and here destiny took a hand. He took his daughter with him, first down the Rhine to Antwerp, where they joined their ship and sailed around the coasts of France and Spain to Genoa and Naples. Ella at the time was seventeen, tall and shapely and beautiful. Toward the end of the cruise, on an excursion to Capri, she was addressed by a fellow traveler, one Bülow, a professor of chemistry at Tübingen.

*“On Capri, the Bülows confessed to Papa that they (Bülow and his wife) had first wondered how the old fellow had come by such a nice young wife before they learned that the unequal pair were actually father and daughter. It was there, on Capri, that Herr Bülow said to Papa: ‘Doctor, you should send your daughter to us in Tübingen. I have just the husband for her,’ to which Papa said: ‘I’m in no hurry!’ When he got home, Bülow said to Rudolf: ‘Herzog, I’ve found a wife for you.’ The next summer, 1902, I was a guest at the Bülows’ for four weeks. The first day I was there, there was a ceremony in the university, and the very first gentleman to be presented to me was Dr. Herzog, whom I often had occasion to meet subsequently.”*

There followed several invitations to dinner, at which she and Rudolf were deliberately placed together, as Ella learned only much later from the correspondence between the Bülows and her parents. She was made a present of these letters later and quotes from them extensively in her memoirs. The seriousness and punctilio of the steps, always respecting Ella’s feelings and opinions, are impressive from today’s vantage point. The chemistry professor von Bülow was deeply convinced that his friend Rudolf Herzog, who had become a classics professor very young and was a man of profound intellect and heart, deserved a woman as splendid and beautiful as Ella. But my grandfather was a shy, rather introverted man, though highly imaginative and with unusual leadership qualities. These appeared soon after the wedding with Ella, who followed him to his

archaeological digs on the island of Cos, where he was in charge of hundreds of Turkish and Greek laborers. He was like a general from antiquity who shared moments of peril with his men, wrapped up in his coat and sleeping by the fires of the sentries.

Ella found Rudolf a little old; there were twelve or thirteen years between them, but books rapidly brought them closer. Rudolf was impressed with her reading, and one day there was a bet with both convinced they were right. Was a certain poem that they both loved by Eichendorff or Hoffmann von Fallersleben? Ella went to her shelves and took down her volume of Fallersleben and won the bet, and later, when Rudolf was consumed with passion for her, he brought her from Tübingen a volume of Eichendorff with a verse inscription that was unmistakably his proposal. In the preceding weeks, she wrote of herself that “*her attic was ablaze.*”

*“Suddenly I was seized by restlessness, I got up from my work, walked through the garden, took up my sewing, got up again, went to see if there was anything in the letter box—nothing—and then all over again, sewing machine, garden, letter box. The next time I picked up my work, I was so excited that I made quite a long rip in the material . . . I ran out into the garden and was no good to man or beast.”*

That day, Rudolf mailed a postcard to announce his visit, but it was still in the post. On a trip into the country, where Ella’s brother (chaperoning them) could briefly be lured away, Ella and Rudolf declared themselves in a brief intimate moment, and that same afternoon their engagement was celebrated. The wedding wasn’t to be for another year, but then, a mere two weeks later, Rudolf wrote that he had to go to Cos for an archaeological expedition and could they not marry right away as he wanted Ella with him? So the wedding took place after the briefest of engagements, and Ella wrote wonderful letters home from the honeymoon. And then, more than fifty years later, in July 1966, to her grandchildren, I among them, she wrote:

*“Rudolf and I lived together happily for almost fifty years. We never had a serious falling out, and yet our marriage was never dull! I hope you*

*manage that one day!! In his eighty-second year, Rudolf left me for good. His dying words, after thanking me, were ‘Life with you was beautiful.’ Then he set his hand on my head in benediction and quietly slipped away.”*

During the last eight years of his life, he had fallen into an ever-profounder dementia. It wasn't Alzheimer's but more like a form of calcification. He no longer recognized anyone. My younger sister, Sigrid, my father's daughter from his second marriage, often visited in Grosshesselohe, where Rudolf had built a house, and whenever her mother, Doris, came to pick her up, my grandfather was invariably inconsolable. He would stand by the garden gate and stop passersby for help; his daughter had been kidnapped; she had been stolen, and he described the three-year-old as an angel of beauty and charm, which was a fair description of my sister, because we all saw her that way. Several times the police were called, and my grandmother would put them in the picture; several times my grandfather managed to slip out of the locked garden and wander around in the adjacent woods in Pullach, precisely where, as luck would have it, the German intelligence services had their headquarters. Alarmed security guards joined the search, and it was usually they who found him. My brother and I, I especially, loved our grandfather, though we could also be mean as children are. Between the veranda and the garden there was a hedge we liked to hide behind, and when we thought we heard Grandpa pottering about the house, we would yell out: “Hey, professor, sharp dresser!” God only knows what we thought we were doing; I hope we were merely carried away by the silly rhyme. My grandfather wandered out with his cane, and we fled into a tall birch in the garden where we knew we were safe from his pursuit. One day my grandmother witnessed our disgraceful teasing. She put me over her knee and walloped me with a wooden spoon until it broke. Then she grabbed another one and broke that as well, that's how furious she was. I had no complaints. I knew I had deserved it.

But my grandfather was always lucid when he was talking about his archaeological excavations and describing the inscriptions on the old marble ruins he had found, in particular at the entrance to the Venetian fortress guarding the port of Cos or built into the masonry. Later, in 1967,

when I was making my first film, *Signs of Life*, as a twenty-five-year-old in this selfsame fortress on Cos, I pushed some of these inscriptions into a shot, and one of my characters translated the writing on a piece of marble in a courtyard. It was the precise analytical evaluation of an antique piece of text that had brought my grandfather from classical philology to archaeology. The text in question was the *Mimiamb*s of Herondas, a somewhat obscure dramatist from the third century BCE. The text, of which only a few lines had previously been known, was found in 1890 almost complete on a well-preserved papyrus scroll in an Egyptian tomb in the Fayoum Oasis. The mimiambi are a series of short farces taken from popular life with generally crude texts for several characters, though they may have been performed by a single masked actor on the street or in the agora doing the characters in different voices. The texts are on profane subjects; one, for instance, is about a maid who can't be got out of bed in the morning even though it is well past time for feeding the pigs; another one is about a brothelkeeper who suddenly starts speaking with the full pathos of Attic tragedy in the sort of classical language that would have been heard onstage a few centuries back; a third is about two young women who are trying to discover from a shoemaker the identity of the purchaser of some dildos he had made. What is striking is how the prudish academics of the late nineteenth century did everything possible to avoid calling a spade a spade. The fifth mimiambus stands out a little, and in a certain way, it decided the course of my grandfather's life. In it, two women visit the shrine of Asclepius, the god of medicine. In his fear that he might make humans immortal, Zeus struck the god dead with a thunderbolt. In the text, the women describe in detail artifacts and temples and sanatoriums on the island of Cos. Herondas, who we think was living and writing in Alexandria, seems with a high degree of probability to have been a native of Cos. Just like Heinrich Schliemann generations before him, who, enthused by the *Iliad*, dug up the ruins of Troy in Asia Minor, so did my grandfather, infected by the mimiambi, shoulder his shovel and set off for Cos. He had the imagination and the feeling for landscape to see the island as it might have been two thousand years earlier when it was still wooded.

In a flat plain of fields and scattered olive groves, for instance, he dug at a spot that was not distinguished by anything and hit some late Roman baths. He had test diggings made on a mountainside, and there found the first clues to a large temple site. Almost fifty years after his discovery, a Greek tourist guide who had worked for my grandfather as a teaboy claimed he had had secret knowledge of the place and had led my grandfather to the correct spot. This version, although disproved by the precise reports of Rudolf's colleagues, keeps coming back because it's in the nature of legends to have a long life irrespective of the facts. My grandfather had a gift that I hold in high regard; he could read landscapes.

One of the phantasms that haunted him as he was losing his mind was a terrible story. He was being thrown out of his house, the house he had built for himself and Ella outside Munich; he was being picked up at dawn; a truck was coming for him that would take away all his things, his books, his clothes, his furniture. Night after night, he would get up, deeply and miserably afflicted, and pack his suits in trunks, prepare his furniture for carting off. And day after day, my grandmother would unpack his suitcases, hang his things back in the wardrobes, and put the furniture back where it belonged. Someone cautiously suggested putting Rudolf in a home, but my grandmother would have none of it. "I've lived happily at the side of this man all my life. Whoever wants to take him away—over my dead body." The most moving moment of all my grandmother only told me about later. Rudolf, her husband, at the end no longer recognized her, and would address her as "Madame." One evening, he appeared in rather formal guise, with a suit and tie. When the first course was over, he carefully folded up his napkin, set down the silverware next to his plate, and rose. "Madame," he said, bowing, "if I hadn't been a married man, I would ask you now for your hand in matrimony."

The house in Grosshesselohe went to pieces after my grandmother's death. The generation after hers was a waste. Starting with my father, Dietrich, it was a lost generation. Rudolf and Ella had one child apart from him, my aunt. I have the utmost respect for her because she was kind and stouthearted, and often slipped my mother money in times of great need.

My father never met his obligations and married twice more. Women were there to raise his children—we referred to them as his second and third litters—and to earn an income for their families. A couple of years before I was born, his sister had married some unsuitable character; there were whispers that he was a commoner, a prole who had never read a book, which sounded refreshing to me, but this man met his death on the Eastern Front, or he may have contracted an illness and died there. My aunt had a daughter with him, and she bravely accepted her fate and became a schoolmistress. My cousin and I were close. We grew up together and always saw each other at family birthdays. In my grandparents' house, which my aunt first moved into and later took over, there was a tenant on the first floor, a Pakistani. I assume he had come to Germany in the chaos following Partition. He was an electrician of some kind, whether professionally trained or self-taught I was never sure, but his little room was always full of disassembled radios that he was repairing for a local clientele. I was often astonished by the ease with which he soldered resistors and sensitive bits of wiring. His name was Raza, and we called him Uncle Raza, or Uncle Cuckoo, because he would cuckoo at us to get our attention when he saw us playing in the garden. When my cousin was fourteen or so, her mother caught her in flagrante with Uncle Raza. Their secret relationship had probably been going on for quite some time, and Raza was put away for a number of years. I didn't learn about all that until much later.

Even before these events, though, my aunt had already lost control over her life. She had a car but disregarded crossings and red lights; it was a mystery to me how she survived for so much as a week the way she drove. She had trouble at work, couldn't keep up with her grading, and got into bizarre arguments with her colleagues. After my grandmother's death, the house fell apart rapidly. My aunt collected anything and everything. Newspapers were stacked along the walls from floor to ceiling, several rows deep; she was almost killed once when a section fell on top of her. She was an obsessive hoarder of paper, string, glass jars, and plastic yogurt cups; the house became a dump. She would cut off the threads of tea bags

and save them, maybe thinking she could braid them into rope in some future crisis. She saved the tiny staples that held them together, and she emptied the bags themselves of their tea to compost the used leaves. But then she was never able to find the things she'd collected. Eventually, she could no longer reach the washing machine in the basement because even the very last little path to it was barred by accumulated junk. My younger brother from the third litter, who had moved in with her as a theology student, watched her pinning up hand-washed underwear to dry in the garden. All she had was the one set of undergarments. She would wash them at night, when it couldn't be seen that she was naked, and put them on, still damp, in the morning. I have photos of the inside of the house. Only the bed, half covered with papers and rubbish, could still be reached along a path winding through piled-up cardboard boxes. When the house was eventually emptied, a jar of blueberries turned up in her basement, which I kept for a long time because it had the year 1942 marked on it. The chaos had seeped out in her last years; even the veranda was laden with trash.

After I grew up, I lost touch with my girl cousin. She married an American mathematician who suffered a series of nervous breakdowns and finally returned to the States. My aunt joined them over there. They ran an organic farm, with goats whose milk and cheese they sold in farmers' markets. My cousin had two children, a boy and a girl. Their circumstances must have been dire, with everyone at each other's throats the whole time. The kids threatened to murder the entire family once, and being under eleven, they could have done it without facing legal sanction. But that part of the tragedy, at least, I only know about secondhand.

## ELISABETH AND DIETRICH

I know much less about my parents' meeting. On the face of it, it's very straightforward; they met as students in Munich, where they were both studying biology and my mother was minoring in sports. They were both early, committed members of the Nazi Party. In the case of my mother, there was the tradition of aspirational Croatian nationalism and a vague suggestion that some of her Stipetić relations were involved in the assassination of the Serbian king, Alexander I. In one moment of confidingness, my mother showed me a photograph of some Austro-Hungarian soldiers posing ostentatiously beside rebels hanged from posts, but the nationality of the victims wasn't apparent. My mother kept a loaded pistol, and she was a good shot, but I think she had it only from the time after the divorce, when my father wanted to have parental rights over me and my brother. As a student in Vienna, my mother had been politically active for the very early Nazis, and before the Anschluss, she had taken refuge in Germany. I think she had probably been arrested, but she never wanted to talk about it. It was an embarrassment to her, a grotesque misjudgment, and in Germany she fairly quickly dropped National Socialism and left the political arena because she could see that it could only end in calamity. She fully understood that by the time I was born, just before the tide turned with the defeats in Russia and North Africa. She wasn't a racist, and I remember how encouraging she was when I got pally with a member of the American occupying forces, the first Black person I had ever met. Before that, there were only the blackamoors from fairy tales.

But this man was tremendous, a huge presence in my memory like the basketball player Shaquille O’Neal. I remember the warmth of his voice; there was nothing but warmth to him. Whenever I meet Africans or African Americans, there is always an echo of this soldier for me. We talked together very animatedly on the little slope behind the house. My mother asked me what language we spoke in, and I was convinced it was American. He gave me a piece of gum, which I chewed on for weeks and always had to keep out of sight of my brother. I stuck it in a crack of our bunk bed, then one day my brother was chewing some gum. I looked in my hiding place, and my piece was gone. But before long, we had earned ourselves more by trades. We supplied earthworms to occupation soldiers who wanted them as bait for trout fishing. We were given chewing gum in return for these “wurmb.”

The roots of my father’s Nazism are in his enthusiastic membership of the student brotherhoods that since the early nineteenth century had been an engine of the German Reich. Because he had studied at various universities, he belonged to no fewer than four different corps, all so-called dueling fraternities, which meant that their members fought ritualized duels in which they cut each other’s faces with sharp foils or sabers, which resulted in so-called dueling scars or honor scars that were visible from some way off. My father was proud of the scars he had on his face, and it was his dearest wish that I too would one day study and join such a fraternity—his firstborn son, my brother Tilbert, soon showed himself to be a dud at school and left academe early. The scars gave my father a dashing look, and then he was always tanned and looked more like a pirate than a professor. He was incredibly learned on all sorts of subjects, had an astonishing memory, and could talk the hind legs off a donkey. All that made him a bit of a charmer, a ladies’ man. His discovery of Nazism was presumably both sincere and opportunistic because it helped him in his academic career. The fact that he quickly qualified as a research assistant, I think, was owed to his membership in the party. He was good at making his own way. After the war, both my parents were put through “de-Nazification,” and for years after, my father was still bitter that Germany had been defeated and that an

American lifestyle was coming to dominate West Germany. American barbarism, as he termed it, nettled him.

Of the beginnings of my parents' relationship all I know is that there was a canoeing and tenting holiday down the Danube. When my father got his call-up papers, they quickly and abruptly got married. There was no wedding photograph that I ever saw. At the end of the war, my father spent a further year in a French POW camp. One day, a strange man stood in our kitchen; my memory has dressed him in a cream suit, but that presumably is an invention. And my mother is asking us over and over: "Do you know who this is? Do you know who this is?" And I, maybe four or so, at last called out: "It's Daddy!" And my father picked me up and was very pleased. But he was to remain to some extent a stranger to me. In my parents' chaotic circumstances and ultimate divorce, I always felt far closer to my mother even though you couldn't call me a mama's boy. At the time of the divorce, my younger brother was born. He goes by my mother's maiden name of Stipetić, and for a while, I was torn between the two surnames. When I entered my first screenplay in a competition (it was for *Signs of Life*), it was under the name Stipetić, but later as a director, I thought I'd better stick to Herzog. To this day, I feel some relief in knowing my origins are somewhat swathed in mystery. Which surname is the nom de plume and which isn't? That question gives me the feeling that people know too much anyway. My publications and film releases render me vulnerable enough: so many breaches in a fortification that stands unprotected anyway.

My younger brother was given a hideously Germanic first name that my mother was loath to even speak after a while—if ever. Instead, she called him Xaverl, but we, his older brothers, didn't think that suited him either, and we called him Lucki. That stuck, and to this day, my brother uses it as though it were his given name. His father was a painter by the name of Thomas who lived halfway between Sachrang and Aschau. Thomas was his surname, I have only just learned his first name; for us, he was just Thomas. There was a certain resemblance to my father. Like him, Thomas was arrogant and lazy; he too was a dazzler, though he had less by way of intellect. It was he who came up with Lucki's first name, which must

remain undisclosed. How my mother met him is something I don't know either. He painted a few half-decent watercolors. He lost two fingers to frostbite in the Russian campaign, and drew a small disability pension, but he never understood why he should make more pictures or do much of anything. He lived with a common-law wife on her tiny farm where she looked after him. And there he got his meals and scrounged a living. We brothers were happy to have an addition to the family, but my mother couldn't manage to look after us without an income because our father never paid his alimony. Once, when she was in the hospital in Wels in Austria with Lucki, she met a family who saw how hard up she was, and they offered to keep Lucki with them. He was then a little cherub who straightaway won all hearts. So it came about that Lucki spent some years in the family of "Uncle Heribert" in Wels. He only joined the rest of us in Sachrang when he was four, and Till and I were delighted to have him with us. Later in life, Lucki played a decisive part in my career. Beginning with *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* in 1972, he was always by my side. He has extraordinary organizational gifts, and it is thanks to him that I had the chance to do so much. He has great musical gifts but saw early on that he would never be a concert pianist. Over the years, he urged me to establish a nonprofit foundation in my name, which now controls the rights to all my films. From an earlier marriage of Thomas's, Lucki has three half siblings named Gundula, Giselher, and Gernot, shadowy forms from the fogs of the Nibelungs. When Thomas eventually died, these siblings decided not to inform Lucki of his passing.

Dietrich, my father, lived with the fantasy of composing a vast work encompassing many intellectual disciplines. Of this, he never wrote a line. This work was his pretext for never working and earning money. In a way, he was principled. His subsequent wives had to earn and raise the children. He steadfastly declined urban life and lived in small villages in Swabia, and when it was warm enough, he did without clothes. The only way I can picture him is naked and deeply tanned, lying on the balcony with a book in one hand and a sharpened pencil between his teeth. He kept marking important passages. His father, Rudolf, my archaeologist grandfather, had

done the same thing. Most of the books in Rudolf's library were copiously underlined and annotated, but in the mania of his last years, he started underlining everything in a book from beginning to end, every line, every word, every letter. My father never exercised his profession as a biologist, but in his self-taught spree, he went through numerous subjects—history, languages, psychology. He spoke passable Japanese because he was a judo aficionado. He had been trained as a handwriting expert and appeared as such occasionally in trials. He was also one of not very many people at the time who had competence in non-European scripts and, for example, correctly identified an Arab hostage taker on the basis of a ransom note in Arabic. But work was the exception rather than the rule. In front of strangers, he could talk passionately of his still-secret opus as though it were completed and needed just a little tinkering before being packed off to the typesetter. When all the time not a sentence of it existed, not a word. His great work was a product of his imagination that he could almost talk himself into believing. He was an utter fantast. There was a moment once when he charmed a visitor with the apparent boldness of his undertaking, and in the kitchen, I whispered in his ear: "But you haven't written any of it." He gave a start like a sleepwalker returned to reality, but the next minute, he was raving about it to his guest again. Sometimes I feel a similar shock when someone names one of my films to me. Did I really make that? Is it possible I've just persuaded myself that I have, or could it be that the film exists, but someone else has made it, not me at all?

At the time of Lucki's birth, Till and I were put with my father for a while in a place called Wüstenrot because my mother was unable to feed us. She was getting ready to move to Munich, but she didn't have a job as yet or a place to live. Wüstenrot is a self-styled spa town not far from Heilbronn and Schwäbisch Hall. Later on, when Till and I were about to go on to high school, we stayed with my father again. We did our last few months of elementary school there, and to our surprise, we were teased for our Bavarian dialect. It was there that I learned High German as a kind of second language. My Bavarian was so strong that my father could sometimes have used the help of an interpreter. When he was taking

pictures once, and changing the film, I was fascinated by the empty roll, so I asked him: “*Kriag I d’Roin, d’laare?*” My mother translated: “*Krieg ich die leere Rolle?*” For the entrance exam to high school, we had to get ourselves to Heilbronn from Wüstenrot on the bus, and both my brother, after five years of elementary school, and I after four, barely noticed there was an exam, that was how easy it was for us. But it was all-important in the future of children of that age, and I remember the tears of other parents and children who had failed. We both got places in the humanistic Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium in Heilbronn, and today I am grateful that my father insisted, faithful to the family tradition, that we learn Latin and Greek. Back in Wüstenrot, he proudly treated us to fried eggs in the village restaurant; I think they were the first fried eggs of my life. In Sachrang on the Berger farm, they had kept a few hens, but the choleric old farmer never gave us any. Even my mother, who had saved him from the firing squad the time the American soldiers found firearms in his straw, was chased away with foul curses and called “bloody cow” and other worse things.

In Wüstenrot, we started playing soccer with local boys and always got muddied clothes. My father thought the game was too common and reckoned we should do something classier, like fencing or field hockey. We were tried out at a hockey club in Heilbronn, and in one of the first training sessions, I got whacked on the shin with a ball. The balls, you must know, aren’t balls at all but rocks the size of your fist. It was incredibly painful, and I got a lump on the bone. That was enough for me. To mask our return to soccer, we wore our games shorts under our proper clothes that we took off after school for our kickabouts on cabbage fields.

Our little sister, Sigrid, charmed both Till and me, and her mother, Doris, my father’s second wife, already disillusioned with him, was secretly in cahoots with us stepchildren from his first marriage. She was extraordinarily pally with us, and I will be forever grateful to her. There in Wüstenrot, and basically ever after, she became like a second mother to me. But there was nothing she could do about my ten-year-old’s desire to be anywhere but where I was. Here too, we kids shared a room. Till had a kind of bed; I lay on a collapsible canvas army cot that had a nasty rubber

mattress the pinkish color of inner tubes. Every night that inflatable mattress lost so much air that it was as flat as a pancake by morning, and the cold woke me, because the room, of course, wasn't heated. I can't remember there being a single night in Wüstenrot that I didn't cry myself to sleep. Of course, I didn't want to give myself away to my brother. But the mornings were always entertaining, because our little sister had just begun to talk, and she would stand up in her cot and harangue the sleepers. Later, at the Otto Falckenberg School of the Performing Arts in Munich, she would train three generations of actors, and I owe her for the discovery of Sepp Bierbichler, who played the lead in my film *Heart of Glass*. That was my 1976 movie in which all the actors are under hypnosis. Sigrid always felt a pull to the theater and directed plays in Germany and the United States. Of late, she has been directing mainly operas.

When we were commuting to school in Heilbronn, the one hour each way on the bus seemed a lot. Because it cost less, we rode in a kind of primitive trailer that carried poor industrial workers to their factories in the valley. The trailer had a little potbellied stove, and the workers played cards or slept. There was only one small window, and the air was thick with cigarette smoke. Before long, my father found us accommodation with a family in Heilbronn, but the only people I can remember are the children. The older brother was called Klett, but I'm not sure if that was his first or last name. He had considerable criminal energies and got us started shoplifting in department stores. It wasn't trivial stealing of the kind many kids get into but very methodical. Klett, only a year older than us, wanted to get into carjacking, but by the time that happened, if it ever did, we were no longer in Heilbronn. I remember how, at his direction, we levered up a round manhole cover and covered the hole with old cement sacks. We sprinkled sand and a few autumn leaves over it so that you had to look hard to see the trap. I seem to remember we wanted to get some pedestrian to fall down into it, so that we could rob him while we were helping him out. Instead, one of our gang absent-mindedly fell into it himself and laid his knee and shinbone open on the sharp metal of the rim so badly that he couldn't walk properly for days.

I missed Sachrang, or if not that, then at least Wüstenrot, where we had our soccer friends, even if they seem pretty dim to my memory now. In Sachrang, where I had spent much more of my life, there was Richter Adi, Kainzen Ruepp, and Hautzen Louis. Kainzen Ruepp later became a dairy hand on the agricultural estate on the Fraueninsel in Chiemsee and died of burns. He must have been drunk and got his bed caught on fire with a cigarette. Louis left the road on his bicycle on a steep road outside Aschau and hit a tree. He died before his twentieth birthday. In Wüstenrot our friends were called Zef and Schinkel. We chased a soccer ball with them every day in all weathers. Later, Schinkel worked as a sprayer in an automobile plant and Zef became a housepainter. The odd thing was that Zef was colorblind, but his boss mixed his paints for him, and all Zef had to do was put it on the walls. When the time came to say goodbye because we were going to Munich, it was the occasion to get blind drunk. We bought the cheapest plonk we could find, a red wine fortified with vermouth. Reeling, I barely made it back to my father's apartment, who put me to bed and brought me a bucket to be sick in. I puked all night, and my father was incredibly proud that he had a son who behaved like a proper frat boy. The fact that I wasn't yet twelve put the icing on it for him. A consequence of that bout was that for decades afterward the sight of a glass of red wine was enough to make me shudder all over, and it was only very gradually that I got over my aversion.

During this time, my mother had tried to get us a start in the city. There was no future for us in Sachrang, the only openings for us were as a woodcutter or cowherd. We had never been completely taken into the village either; we weren't outsiders, but they did treat us as incomers. It was more like the other fugitive children and the kids from the surrounding farms were drawn into *our* circle. Shortly after the war ended, the first CARE packages started to arrive that helped us through the worst, thanks to the Marshall Plan. I will always be grateful to America for them. The packages contained, among other things, corn flour, which we were unfamiliar with and which was therefore suspicious to us. My mother got us to try it by telling us the reason the flour was so yellow was that it

contained egg yolks, so it was especially nutritious. From then on, we ate it enthusiastically. And one of the earliest packets contained a book, printed like a large schoolbook: *Winnie-the-Pooh*. I bow to the intelligence and compassion it must have taken to throw in something like that. Probably no one knows who had such an idea, but my respect goes to the man or woman responsible. In our small kitchen in the dower house, the whole gaggle of local children assembled; there were fourteen of us, thirteen boys and the “girleen” from the Berger farm, who put most of the boys to shame with her boldness. Pressed into a rigid mass, we filled the sofa, a couple of chairs, the floor, and the window seat as we listened breathlessly to my mother reading to us in different voices about the escapades of Christopher Robin, Winnie-the-Pooh, Piglet, and Eeyore. I swear we forgot to breathe. Then there were other books like *The Amber Bead*, about an orphan girl growing up poor and disdained, but around her neck she wore an amber bead by which, after lots of back and forth, her noble parents recognize her. We were able to take this story only in brief installments because we dissolved in tears each time. I remember girleen’s brother, Ernst, who alone didn’t listen to the readings, roughly yanking open the kitchen door and calling: “Girleen, pigs want feeding!” Crying, girleen clambered out of the mob of children and looked to the pigs. Half an hour later, still crying, she was back, and my mother switched to some jollier book.

How we loved our little house. Today, it’s been crudely renovated, and the whole of the back half, which used to be an airy barn, turned into apartments. But back then it had mystery; there were mysterious creakings and hauntings. Once I bumped into God there. I was four-ish, and my brother Till and I were bragging about how on Saint Nicholas Day, on the dark landing, we would rig up a trip wire for Krampus, who in Austria and Southern Germany was a kind of rustic demon in fur and horns rattling about to terrorize naughty children with a heavy chain. We were thrilled by the idea; we weren’t scared a bit; we outdid each other in our fearlessness. We also had the notion that Saint Nick in person would stumble into our kitchen and land flat on his belly, and all the presents would come tumbling out of his sack, and we wouldn’t have to listen to his admonishments. But

the nearer Saint Nicholas Day approached, the more our courage seemed to evaporate. We never put up the trip wire. I listened to Krampus stamp his hooves on the landing and rattle his chain, and I fled under the sofa. The next thing I felt was Krampus grabbing me by the seat of my pants and pulling me out. I stood there and I think I wet myself. But then I saw God, who smiled at me. He leaned against the doorjamb wearing washed brown overalls with dark oil stains on them, and I knew I was saved. It was God. Much later, I heard the man happened to have come by from the little electrical hut in the gorge by the waterfall and had followed the actual Nicholas into the house. There was a little generator in the forest, run on water from the stream, which this man occasionally looked in on to lubricate. In the early years after the war, you could never count on there being electricity. Often there was just candlelight in the kitchen.

The move to the city was unavoidable. We hardly knew anything about the world outside the valley. Aschau, twelve kilometers away, was the limit of the known world. Rosenheim existed as a distant glow in the sky. On rare occasions, cars came from there, and when we spotted one, we ran to gawk at it. Once, on a sharp bend, one lost control and slid into the stream right under Sturm Ötz. We would often gather there in the hope of seeing another one come to grief. Once we saw Siegel Hans on his motorbike taking the corner lying over, and accelerating away. Ever since, I have been fascinated by cars—by watching them, at any rate. In 2009, in *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*, I deliberately switched the murder commission's interrogation room for the questioning of suspects to a room overlooking a freeway bridge with heavy traffic. We had to put in heavy plexiglass double windows to tune out the rumble of trucks. All I knew of Aschau, the small town at the head of the valley with its two or three cars, was the hospital. When I was six, I suffered some fits of choking in the middle of the night and ran out of the bedroom onto the icy passageway outside. I was struggling to breathe. It must have been a desperate moment for my mother. With the help of Frau Schrader, the refugee woman upstairs, she bundled me up in a sheepskin and strapped me to a sleigh. It was two in the morning; there was no telephone and no transport because the road to

Aschau was snowed under and impassable. The two women dragged me through the snowdrifts for more than four hours to the little hospital in Aschau. So far as I remember, I had a bad case of croup. There are two things I remember from the hospital: I was given an orange. I had never seen such a thing before, and a nurse had to show me how it was peeled. Then she left me. I didn't know what to do then, so I carefully segmented it then just stared at the segments. Finally, I started to peel the individual segments. The longish crescent forms, now naked, I then pressed into my mouth. The taste was indescribably wonderful. The other thing I remember was that I spent several days playing with a loose thread that I had pulled from the seam of a blanket. I was mesmerized by the incredible possibilities of the thread—it was a revelation to me. My mother told me later that for a whole week I had nothing but this thread, but my time with the thread was thrilling.

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## MUNICH

**B**efore we moved there, we had been to Munich precisely once. There were still great heaps of rubble around the central station, and my brother and I greeted everyone who passed us on the street, hundreds of them, because that was what we did on the village street in Sachrang. Also, we pulled down the fronts of our lederhosen and peed on the street. For the only time in her life, my mother disowned us. Then, while we were with our father in Wüstenrot a few years later, she looked for lodgings for us and paid her way with occasional work as a cleaning woman and as a sort of peddler with a female friend. In the newly reopened film studios on the edge of the city at Geiselgasteig, they sold nylon stockings to extras. All of it my mother did uncomplainingly, driven by pragmatism and willpower. She worked for a period as home help to an American occupying officer; later, she hardly ever talked about it. She cleaned the apartment, did the laundry, and cooked; and the man's wife made her life a misery. My mother walked the dog, and sometimes, after there had been substantial meals, the woman of the house swept the leftovers into a dish and gave it to her. "Elisabeth, this is for the dog and you." My mother was as brave as any woman I've ever known, and her bravery was paired with a resolute character that was just as outstanding. A few years later, when Till and I, then nineteen and twenty, acquired a motorbike between us, we had almost weekly accidents. Till skidded on some streetcar tracks and slid slowly under a bus but ended up suffering nothing worse than a scraped elbow, while I lost the back end on some gravel on a downhill bend and finished up

in a field. There was no such thing as a law requiring helmets. There was always something, and our mother had every reason to object to the bike. She didn't want to have to carry one of her sons to the graveyard one day. But our pleasure in the bike was too great. We called it "D'machine," capital *D*, apostrophe, machine. We didn't ride D'machine; we fucked her. Beer wasn't drunk but instead, after we'd got it out of the kitchen, married. A schnitzel wasn't eaten; it was a scrap of meat that was scavenged. Nor did we sleep; we gurgled. One evening after supper, our mother was smoking a cigarette. All her adult life, she had been a heavy smoker. This time she just took a few puffs of the cigarette and stubbed it out. Then she told us to sell the bike, give it up, and never buy another one. And that would have been her last cigarette. She never smoked again, and within the week, we were rid of D'machine.

While she was looking for somewhere for us to live, our mother stayed in a little pension that was just one story below the attic where I had spent my first few days after being born. The roof had since been repaired, but almost all the other buildings along Elisabethstrasse were either ruins or half built. The rubble was transported away truckload after truckload to the ever-higher mountains of rubble. The biggest of these later formed part of the Munich Olympic terrain, grown over with grass and trees and with a small artificial lake that almost reached as far as the transparent roof of the great stadium. All my friends who grew up in Munich remember those early postwar years with enchantment. They had the best settings to play in. Bands of kids ruled the roost, lording it over the bombed-out streets and blocks. They collected bits of metal and sold it to scrap dealers. They turned up weapons, pistols, and hand grenades. Once they found a corpse dangling from the beams of a ruin. They grew up early and fast, and they loved it. I keep on hearing voices expressing sympathy for these children, but that doesn't chime with their experience. Just like me in the Alps, these children in the city in the immediate postwar years had the most wonderful childhood imaginable. Even Dieter Dengler, who I later made a film about —two films, a documentary and a drama, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* in 1997 and *Rescue Dawn* in 2006—who had grown up in some seclusion in

Wildberg in the Black Forest, said the same thing, though their poverty had been even worse than ours. He remembered how his mother took him and his little brother into bombed-out houses where they stripped the wallpaper off the ruined walls. Then his mother would boil the paper because there were nutrients in the glue. Still, I would never idealize a period that was the outcome of a terrible war and terrible German crimes. All we remember is what things felt like, but war is always terrible and seems to get worse with technical innovations. Two things remained with me as an echo of that time. When there was food on the table, I had to eat quickly, because if I didn't, my brothers would hoover everything up. To this day, I bolt my food even if I tell myself to chew each bite and eat mindfully. And the second is that I have trouble throwing food away, especially bread. My fridge is always closely attended to. I find it staggering that in the industrialized world 40 percent of all food is thrown away; the figure for the United States is apparently even higher. I'm rarely among people who've had my experiences growing up, so I watch silently as vast portions are dished up in restaurants, half of which end up as landfill. The craze for consumerism has spread over the entire industrialized world and done enormous damage to the health of our planet. The obesity that has so many people in its grip is only one obvious side of consumption. It's not as though I don't occasionally find a moldy lettuce in my fridge, but it's still rare for me to throw anything away.

The pension on Elisabethstrasse was a rambling old-fashioned apartment, of which five or six rooms were let. The owner, Clara Rieth, had in her youth belonged to the artsy Schwabing scene of the 1920s when that was the bohemian part of Munich. It's been a long time since there were artists living there, much as the Montmartre district of Paris eventually froze into its own monument while keeping some sense of the late nineteenth century alive for the benefit of tourists. Then in the sixties and seventies, when the New German Cinema came into being, almost all the directors lived in Schwabing, and Munich was the cultural capital of Germany. Then, when Berlin took over from Bonn as the capital of Germany, almost everyone left to go there. Clara was greatly interested in

theater and art, and went around looking very striking, with hair dyed a brilliant orange, much as the punks would do theirs decades later. In the large corridor of her apartment, one section was separated off behind a heavy curtain, behind which lived the friend of my mother's who sold stockings with her. There was one room where a Turkish engineer lived, and the one next to him was ours, four of us together: Mama, Till, Lucki, and I in a single room adjoining the bathroom that everyone used. We used to have to arrange to use it with everyone else. Clara cooked for all the lodgers, that was included in the price. "I cook with love and butter," she said, but the thing about butter was an exaggeration; it was strictly margarine. In that apartment, I learned once and for all how to manage in a tiny space and also how to concentrate even when there was pandemonium around me. Even today I can read or write in the middle of a mob of people, seemingly oblivious to their presence. Under the pressure and the multiple demands of endless people on a film set, I am capable of rewriting a whole section of a screenplay when some external necessity compels a sudden change of course.

One day when I was going up the stairs on my way home from school, I heard a commotion from inside. I unlocked the door of the apartment, and the first thing that met my eyes was Hermine, eighteen, a stout country girl from Lower Bavaria. She was chasing after a young man I'd never seen before, smacking him with a wooden tray. The man was yelling shrilly. He had reached under her skirt. It was Klaus Kinski. Much of what I described half a century later in my film *My Best Fiend* of 1999 may be familiar, but I will recapitulate my memory of him here. Good-hearted as she was, Clara Rieth had taken Kinski in off the street, where he was pleased to style himself as a starving artist. Already at that time, Kinski had acquired a reputation as an unusual performer of various small roles in different theaters. He didn't make much money, but it must be said that he also loved the part of the misunderstood starving genius. Not far from us, he had squatted in an empty attic in an old apartment house and frightened away the legitimate owner, who wanted to throw him out. Instead of furniture, he had scattered dry leaves throughout this apartment until eventually they

were knee-deep. He slept in them. Like my father, he never wore clothes when he was at home; he disdained them as the hypocrisy of civilization that kept us from ever experiencing true nature. When the postman knocked, a stark-naked Kinski would come rustling to the door. Onstage, he provoked one scandal after another; word of that had already got around. Anytime he became aware of the least inattention on the part of the audience, just a little cough would do it, he screamed abuse at the spectators. He hurled a candelabrum with burning candles into the audience; he would have regular fits of rage because he hadn't learned his lines properly and choked. When he had a monologue in one production where he knew only the beginning, he rolled himself up in a carpet on the stage and lay there until the audience started to protest and the theater was forced to drop the curtain. I experienced many of these sorts of incidents in the films I later made with him, but at that time, film wasn't on my mind. I was thirteen or so; he was twenty-six. As an opponent of all forms of civilization, he also disdained silverware. At the table for the lodgers, he ate with his hands, head over his plate, scooping it up. "Eating's a bestial act," he yelled at the frightened Clara, and when it one day dawned on him that she really did cook with margarine, not butter, he smashed plates in the kitchen and hurled an iron casserole through a closed window. I remember how Clara once invited a theater critic to supper to help boost Kinski's reputation. The critic's name was Francois, and he was so fat that his pants wouldn't do up. He was solidly in Kinski's camp, praising him for his performance the previous evening. "You were splendid; you were magnificent!" Then something happened very quickly, a streak of movement that one only sees in cartoon films—and Kinski had hurled a succession of steaming hot potatoes off his own plate right across the table into the critic's face and simultaneously had leapt to his feet, pale with rage. There followed knives and forks snatched from the place settings of his neighbors, a veritable Gatling burst, and with all that going on, Kinski roared: "I was not splendid; I was not magnificent. I WAS MONUMENTAL; I WAS EPOCHAL."

Things went on in this way for several months while he stayed with us. Clara had given him a tiny room with a narrow window over the courtyard at the back, the only available room in her pension. He lived there rent free, and she fed him and washed and pressed his clothes without asking for payment. I still remember him doing speech exercises for hours on end behind his closed door. It sounded more like practice for a singer, modulations for clarity, pitch, and volume. This is in flat contradiction to his later claim that everything had come to him without the least effort, as a genius, like a true creature of the *Sturm und Drang* period of German literature. Kinski could yell louder than anyone I ever knew. He could shatter wineglasses with his voice; when he shrilled, they cracked. Once, his place remained empty at suppertime. Then suddenly he exploded in as though something colossal had been dropped from a delayed bombing raid. He must have used the whole corridor as a run-up because, with a terrible crash, he took the door off its hinges. Kinski, with stroboscopic twitchings, was whirling his arms around—no, scattering clothes up in the air—and emitting inarticulate cries of the kind that Clara's glasses could not survive. Once the clothes, like so many autumn leaves, had come to rest all over the table and floor, Kinski's screams finally became comprehensible. He was screaming: "CLARA, YOU BITCH!" And only when the outburst was over did it become clear that he was annoyed that Clara had failed to starch his collars sufficiently.

I can't remember how my brothers reacted to him. But I know that, aside from my mother, I was the one who was not afraid of him. To me, he was a force of nature; it was like watching the devastation wrought by a passing tornado. At the end of about three months, Kinski locked himself up in the communal bathroom. We could hear him rampaging inside. There was a crash, then a dangerous silence. Clara knocked on the door and tried to get him to calm down. The reason for his recurring fits of rage this time is unclear to me to this day, but the intensity of it only picked up through Clara's attempted interventions. We knew, standing outside, that he was demolishing all the fixtures in the bathroom. It was just as well that there was a second toilet with a small hand basin out on the landing that we could

use. Kinski's onslaught continued for a day and a half. Then, when everything had been smashed to smithereens—the basin, the toilet bowl, the mirror, parts of the bath—Kinski appeared with a transfigured face, and my mother, Clara being too frightened, took the job of evicting him, which she did perfectly matter-of-factly. The spell was broken. When I started working with him fifteen years later, I knew what I was letting myself in for.

Till and I were admitted to the humanistic Maximilian Gymnasium in Munich. The school enjoyed a distinguished reputation. In addition to offering eight years of Latin and six of Greek, it set high standards in math, physics, literature, and art. Two of the great theoretical physicists of the twentieth century, Max Planck and Werner Heisenberg, had studied here. It's hard to explain the point of dead languages to people today. Latin, in a pinch, but only for lawyers, theologians, and historians. In purely practical terms, these languages are useless. But their study gave us a profounder understanding of the origins of Western culture, of literature, of philosophy, of the deepest currents of our understanding of the world we live in. I must say, I always felt like a stranger there but only toward the other pupils, who all came from prosperous middle-class backgrounds. I didn't often think of myself as poor—the contradictions of a class society were not so pronounced that I was unable to deal with them. Even in my schooldays, though, I had a sense of everyone working on their careers; that was something that struck me. I had few friends and hated the school, sometimes so passionately, I imagined going there at night when it was empty and setting it on fire. There is such a thing as academic intelligence, and I didn't have it. Intelligence is always a bundle of several qualities: logical thought, articulacy, originality, memory, musicality, sensitivity, speed of association, organizational capacity, and so on and so forth; but in my case, the bundle seemed to be differently composed. My older brother suffered much worse, as he fitted even less into the schema. It emerged that he was a complete misfit at school even though he was an extraordinarily intelligent boy; but it was another kind of intelligence that manifested itself in his leadership qualities. At school, he was invariably in charge of

whatever dissident activity we put on. There was never any doubt about the pecking order, never any question about who was the leader. Even today, when Till turns up somewhere, he radiates “boss.” Not that he has to put on any show, the way the alpha primates do, it’s just a quality he has. As I see it, he’s the one success in the family. And I am only half joking here. By year two at the Maximilian Gymnasium, it was already clear that he had neither the patience for nor any grasp of Latin. He failed the class and had to take the year again. From then on, I had a brother who was a year ahead of me in age and a year behind me at school. He absolved what we called the “lap of honor” but then failed the next class as well and was thereby two years behind me. Impulsively, he quit the unloved and unsuitable school at fourteen. He was apprenticed in a timber company, and his career took off. At the age of twenty-one, he was the head of acquisitions and sales, driving a company Mercedes, and a few years later, he cofounded a trading company partnered with a partially state-owned Yugoslav company that had ties to China. This company grew quickly, setting up furniture factories in Manchuria and Sichuan, with all the machinery exported there by Till’s firm. At the time, Till spent weeks in China with a delegation from Yugoslavia. Later on, a similarly structured Yugoslav company in the leather and footwear sector bought into Till’s firm with the result that some five million pairs of quality shoes were designed in Italy, manufactured in Yugoslavia, and sold in Russia. The leather too was Italian, and the whole project was financed by my brother’s company and set off against shoe deliveries. The Communist parties of Austria and Greece both derived benefits from the trade, lending the prestige of those countries to the Soviet Union. The additional costs were added to the delivery price with the full knowledge and approval of the Soviets. Then a Yugoslav car firm—just to demonstrate the breadth of Till’s interests—ordered two thousand Japanese cars, paid in advance with a delivery time of six months, the sale in deutsche marks, and the purchase in yen. At that time, there was no way of hedging exchange rates in Yugoslavia, so Till’s firm acted as the purchaser, thus getting a lump sum of twenty million marks on account right away. Till

didn't make anything on the cars, but interest rates at the time were 8 percent, so in the space of six months, he cleared 800,000 marks interest.

In its best years, his company had a turnover exceeding 100 million marks, always with highly profitable deals focused on Yugoslavia. At the age of fifty-one, after thirty-six years of intense work, Till was burned out. He later told me, perfectly matter-of-factly, that if he'd stayed he would have been dead within a year from managerial stress. He sold his shares, and his generous salary as manager and the annual bonuses meant that he never needed to work again. He spent time on the Mediterranean and the Caribbean on his yacht. Then he built himself a palatial estate on the Costa Blanca. Nowadays he's shuttling between Munich and Spain. He has been happily married for forty-seven years and has two wonderful sons.

While Till was getting going on his business career, my mother had found a full-time job in a well-established antique shop dealing in art and first editions, where the extremely prosperous owners paid her a scandalously mean wage. They never failed to let their customers know, meanwhile, that she was academically trained and had a doctorate to her name. Her earnings would not have been enough for a family of four. My brother quickly became the principal breadwinner, and but for him, I would hardly have been able to stay in school even though I too was earning. In my free time I was a laborer, stacking planks. It was pure physical labor. The planks, mainly of tropical woods, were long and incredibly heavy, and we had to stack them horizontally by twos or fours with lathes between them to form well-ventilated stacks that didn't fall over.

Incidentally, I rarely call my older brother Tilbert and practically never Till; I call him Filberer instead. When he visited me during the preparations for *Aguirre* in Peru in 1971, a domestic airline accidentally issued a ticket to him not as Tilbert Herzog but as Filberer Herzog. We started calling him that, and for some reason it stuck. Later on, when we were really up against it, he saved the film with a loan while assuming he would never see his money again. But I paid him back, as I always paid all my debts. With Till, I went on a drive from Lima into the Andes. The original plan had been for *Aguirre* to begin at high altitude on a glacier with distant ribbons of men

and beasts, Spanish conquerors and Indigenous enslaved laborers chained together, alpacas and a herd of black swine, muskets, cannons, and litters. The pigs were supposed to fall victim to altitude sickness and reel about on the zigzag path, and for that, I needed a vet to make some tests. In the end, nothing came of the idea. But I was still looking for a glacier that was in some proximity to a drivable road to make access easier, and Till and I drove three hours from sea level in Lima up to the Ticlio Pass, which is just a shade under five thousand meters up. It started snowing. We were wretched with altitude sickness. We decided, still looking for a glacier, to go down a smaller side road, but on our way, we went by numbers of almost impassable places where landslides had flooded the roadway and sometimes washed it away. The snow got heavier, and we finally saw a huddle of huts where we decided to stop. As soon as we reached the village square, though, we found ourselves ringed by a crowd of furious people. Men pounded on the car with their fists. Behind us, I saw more men blocking the exit road with heavy stones; in front of us, chunks of rock had also been placed in our way. We climbed out, thinking we were at greater risk inside the car. We were pulled and poked at but remained completely calm. A few of the Quechua men could speak Spanish, and I tried to find out as best I could in the midst of the wild commotion what the matter was. To this day, I don't really know what precipitated the situation, but given what I managed to glean from scraps of what they were yelling, it seemed to be about an accident at a nearby mine that had cost the lives of several Indigenous workers. Evidently, they took us for the culpable mine engineers. Finally, the infuriated crowd grasped that we had nothing to do with this, and they escorted us to the cantina to patch things up over a few pisco. But we didn't feel like drinking; we felt utterly wretched and close to vomiting, and I had a splitting headache. To seal our reconciliation, they put us to bed on a couple of straw mattresses and brought us a couple of young women. "Here are two ponies you can ride all night," we were told. It was a curious image that etched itself into my memory. In front of us were the two women, both barefoot and wearing several layers of skirts. The cold seemed not to bother them. They had the bright-red cheeks of

people who live at great altitude. Both had the bowler hats that Quechua women affect and were holding them up in the air. They stood that way for a long time, perfectly still, as though made from a different kind of reality. I did not remotely understand this display of something so utterly alien. I was excluded from the reality around about me but still felt deeply immersed in its mystery.

In the upper classes of the gymnasium, I seesawed between two parallel classes, one for Catholics and one for Lutherans. This was partly to do with the fact that I had converted to Catholicism but also that I didn't always observe the school calendar. In the year my brother started working, I had hitchhiked with him to the north of Germany. We had split up there, and I wasn't back for school until the end of the first week. In the intervening time, I had slept in a garden shed and let myself into an empty villa in Essen with the aid of my "surgeon's kit." Another time, I tacked on an additional month to the summer vacation. I was seventeen. I had followed my then girlfriend to England, where I acquired a part share in a brick terraced house in a working-class area near Elizabeth Street in Manchester with four Nigerians, three grown-ups and a small child, and three Bengalis. I was briefly the proud owner of a room. The house was pretty run-down, the backyard was full of rubble, and I caught mice in the fireplace. In both cases, my mother backed me up and wrote apologetic notes to the school, saying I had come down with bronchitis. Because the school had admitted another pupil in my place the second time and the class was now full, I was shunted over to the parallel class of Protestants. Today, I am happy about that, because I made two friends who were important to me. One was Rolf Pohle, who was musical and played the violin. He suffered, not superficially either but to the depths of his soul, from terrible acne. In soccer games, he was a dogged defender, a terrier; you dribbled around him only to find him facing you again two paces farther on. Rolf went on to study law, moved steadily left in his thinking, became the head of AStA at Munich University in 1967, and in 1968, he was organizing demonstrations in Munich in spite of police bans during the so-called Easter Riots. That got him a court appearance, and shortly before his final exams, he was banned from the

study of the law. Which radicalized him still more. He became associated with the Baader-Meinhof Gruppe, the RAF, and went underground. Because he had a valid weapons license, he became the purveyor of pistols for violent actions. He disappeared from my ken completely until he caused a car accident on a winter motorway near Augsburg. He fled on foot across a snowy field, disappeared, and was finally arrested at the end of 1971. I attended his month-long high-security trial in Munich. My details had surely landed me on lists of suspected RAF sympathizers, but I had nothing in common with those people. When he was sentenced to six and a half years, I visited him in prison in Straubing. I knew the prison from way back, because as a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old I had wanted to make my first film there—just as well that nothing came of that idea. The fragmentary screenplay, which turned up recently, is scarcely credible foolishness. Was that really me? There were intense security precautions for visitors to Straubing, and for one year, Rolf Pohle was put in complete isolation.

It was at the end of this period that I was allowed to see him. I brought him a Super Ball, one of those bouncy things. We had often thrown one against the wall in the schoolyard where it bounced erratically on the cobbled ground. The balls were wildly unpredictable, and you had to develop extraordinary reflexes—like a goalie in ice hockey—to catch them. Sensing trouble, I asked them to x-ray the ball at the security entrance to the prison to check that there was nothing inside it but its peculiar self. The two detectives who went on to attend our meeting and take notes on our conversation knew exactly what it was and that it was only a ball. They knew as well that Rolf on his solitary exercise rounds in a narrow concrete yard covered with wire mesh could have used such a ball. Even so, it was confiscated without a word of explanation. Nor could I really talk to Rolf. When he sat down facing me across a little table, the cuffs and anklets were not taken off him, and not having spoken to anyone for a year, he was barely capable of speech anyway. He was far too loud for the short distance, I told him right away; and it was only in the last minute or so of our meeting that he found the correct volume. Furthermore, instead of

conversing, he barked political slogans at me. Eye contact was no longer on offer.

His sentence was later increased. He was on a list of six prisoners to be exchanged for the Berlin politician Peter Lorenz in 1975. Lorenz had been kidnapped by the 2 June Movement in support of the RAF. The prisoner exchange duly happened, and Rolf and the other freed prisoners were flown to Aden in the communist People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen. But when the state let them go and gave them money, Rolf had probably demanded a higher sum than what was on offer—at least that was what was said later. Because this was interpreted as extortion, that would eventually get him a few more years in prison when they recaptured him in Greece and the Germans had him extradited. I never saw him again. He left Germany, married his Greek defender, and obtained residence in Greece. I heard he was very ill. He died in 2004 in Athens; the official cause was cancer; unofficially, it was AIDS.

My other friend in the class of Protestants was crucial in my later development. His name was quite a mouthful: Wolfgang von Ungern-Sternberg von Pürkel. I hadn't really been aware of him in previous years, partly because he was in the parallel class and partly because he had missed many months through illness. He was tall, as thin as a rake, and had a narrow, ascetic head that was always perched forward, like that of a bird of prey. He was one of those geniuses who grasp complex processes spontaneously and from there are able to develop their own bold thoughts. Wolfgang appears as an actor in several of my early films. He and his brother Jochen, also in our class, came from the Protestant rectory right next to our gymnasium. All four children were gifted. Jochen, somewhat younger, was outstanding in all subjects, but unlike his brother, he was a quiet, introverted boy, a silent sort with depth. He became a lawyer, had a brilliant career, and became the youngest German supreme court judge there has ever been. Wolfgang, meanwhile, was a genius and didn't care that he wasn't equally good at everything. He had a feeling for literature that I have never seen in anyone else. At the age of sixteen, he practically ran our German class. What he would do is volunteer politely near the beginning of

a lesson, often with a bow: “Excuse me, sir, I beg to differ.” Asked to set out his view, he would, with further apologetic bows, improvise brilliant digressions that followed his own completely original observations. He wasn’t the sort to be impressed by textbooks with normative interpretations. He spoke in cascades of complex sentences that were ripe for publication. He usually overheard the bell for the end of class but carried on to an empty classroom. It had simply escaped his notice that everyone had gone.

For me, he was an absolute godsend. At last, someone with the fire inside them that I so badly missed. The University of Munich recognized his extraordinary talent and allowed him to begin there while finishing high school. At the time he took his school final exams, he had already passed six semesters of German at the university. He and I were very different in the way we approached things; he laid out his arguments in detail and showed the whole scintillating complexity of a thought, which caused him later to go on fiddling with his dissertation and doctorate, while I concentrated on the bold outlines and went for the heart of a problem. But he was an enthusiast at whose flame I took light. It was through him that I discovered the first reference anywhere to Lope de Aguirre for my film *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*. I visited him once, and he hardly greeted me, then dashed back to the phone. He was lovesick. I saw that he had no time for me, so I went along the endless rows of his books. Almost at random, I took one down because it seemed to stick out. It was a book for twelve-year-olds, say, about discoverers. Vasco da Gama appeared in it, and Columbus, but there was a single brief paragraph about ten lines long that aroused my curiosity. It was a passage about one of the conquistadors named Aguirre, who in the quest for El Dorado, the fabled kingdom of gold, had traveled the length of the Amazon. Having reached the mouth of the river, he made for the Caribbean and wanted to snatch the whole of South America from the Spanish crown. He called himself the “Great Betrayer,” the “Pilgrim,” and the “Wrath of God.”

I hadn’t ever really been particularly keen on literature or history at school, but that was probably just part of my negative feeling for the place. I was by nature an autodidact, but as soon as gymnasium was over, I

applied to study history and literature at the university. But my studies were just a sham; that was clear to me from the beginning because I was already making my first films and had to earn money to finance them. Even physically, I was hardly ever there; there were entire semesters when I showed up once, maybe twice.

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## SECOND MEETING WITH GOD

In spite of my new friends in the other class, the Catholic stream also left traces in my life long past the end of school. My brothers and I had grown up irreligious, as heathens. I never remarked on this until one day in Sachrang when the local priest screamed at us for being godless and slapped my older brother in the face. We might have been six or seven at the time. Both of our parents were atheists, my father militantly so. Later, in Munich, when I was thirteen, I started to feel a kind of emptiness. There was a yearning for transcendence, sublimity, that left me restless. People close to me, like my brother Till, never quite caught on. He thought I had allowed myself to be taken in by our current religious studies teacher, who was a Catholic priest. We referred to him as *der Läben* because of the sheeplike bleat in which he kept talking about “das äwige Läben” (for *das ewige Leben*, the eternal life), but that would be a big simplification. Friends of mine thought my step to Catholicism might have been an act of protest against my father, but that was a superficial and actually rather foolish idea because, after all, my mother was an atheist as well. My father was a marginal figure in my life; I never had to assert myself against him to attain my independence. Nor was it a matter of replacing an absent father with some higher substitute as though I had missed his love. It’s a familiar phenomenon, boys—girls too—having difficulties when there is a dearth of love and intimacy in their lives. In my case—indeed, in the case of us all—we had the obverse: *a father who was not loved*. Not one of my siblings from the first or second or third litter had any affection for him; even his

three wives turned away from him. In the case of the third, that's an inference I draw because she conspired against him with my mother and with Doris. His sister detested him; even his own mother, my grandmother, would never talk about her son, Dieter; he was always just the asshole. When I was fourteen, I got myself baptized and confirmed the same day. I was a Catholic of my own will.

That step involved the overcoming of several obstacles. They were of three kinds: church history, the hierarchical structure of the church, and dogma. The matter of church history is easily described. I had problems, for instance, with the Inquisition or with the fact that the church always took the side of the oppressor in the conquest of foreign lands and peoples, as in the New World. The hierarchy offended my deepest nature. I would have far preferred a religion like Islam, where the priestly caste plays a lesser role, because it leaves the human being alone with God with no mediation.

My greatest difficulties were with dogma. The Trinity bothered me because God the Creator has a Son and Holy Ghost at His side. Then the Virgin Mary was added to the mix, a quasi mother-god, and an entire pantheon of lesser gods in the form of the numerous saints. Had I lived in the fourth century, I'm sure I would have favored the Arian heresy. The question of the nature, the substance, of God was expressed by Arius, a priest from Alexandria, essentially as follows: God is unique in His being, He exists from Himself, and depends on nothing else. He is outside of time. His son was created from Him and is therefore inside of time. The son therefore belongs to a different order of existence and is not of the same immutable substance. At the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, Arianism was declared a heresy, but I would have felt happier on the side of the heretics. My sympathies were with another thinker, Pelagius, who was pronounced a heretic at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431. He is the founding father of free will in Catholic theology at the end of the fourth and early fifth centuries. His argument was that man is fitted with the moral facility of not sinning and that he therefore has free will. Saint Augustine won out with his view that original sin is innate in mankind, and that but for the grace of God, there could be no life without sin. *Non possum non peccare*, it is

impossible for me not to sin, was his celebrated dictum. Myself, I would see the church father Augustine as the heretic sooner than Pelagius. And I have an observation to make on the Bavarian Pope Benedict XVI, who was head of the Roman Catholic church from 2005 to 2013. I liked him for his intellectual rigor. As pope, his public appearances were mostly respected, but his handling of public relations was a disaster. I presume too that he retired prematurely because he was losing his faith. In his address at Auschwitz, which was not long, he asked no fewer than three times: “Where was God? Where was God when this was happening?” Or was he torn between Augustine and Pelagius, where the former declared that everything God created was good? How could God create Man as a fallen being? Part of my decision to join the church at the age of fourteen will have been that this was, after all, the religion of my native Bavaria. At the same time, I understood that as a member of the church and a layman of the church I was obliged to intervene where I saw fit and support reforms. My religious phase didn’t last long; it evaporated. After a couple of years, I officially left the church even though, according to Catholic dogma, baptism leaves an indelible mark on the human soul. In theory, one can leave the church or even be excommunicated and still remain a Catholic. But that idea didn’t make much impression on me either.

To begin with, though, there was a brief period of devoutness. It’s difficult for me to fathom now; it bemuses me. I was briefly an altar boy, but my brother Till made fun of me, and I saw that I would eventually just end up in some amen corner. What I wanted was a more radical form of Christianity, so I joined a group my age that my family called the association of saints. We dreamed of an idealized version of early Christianity that almost certainly never existed. Our living idol was a Jesuit, Father Leppich, whose street assemblies drew crowds up and down Germany. With his radicalism, Leppich was irresistible to teenagers. On closer inspection, his demagogic bothered me. Soon it became downright repellent, and with that, the time of my own radicalism was gone. The association of saints was inspired by the German Wandervogel movement in the early twentieth century, and we took several trips in their spirit, the

first of them to Lake Ohrid on the border of Yugoslavia, Greece, and Albania. It was then too that we hiked along the Albanian border. I have remained fascinated by Albania. After the end of the Second World War, it had been conceived by Enver Hoxha as a bastion of Chinese Communism and thus stood aloof from the USSR. At that time, in the late fifties, the country was hermetically sealed off from everywhere; they gave no visas. It was a mysterious terra incognita. Later, I traveled alone along the border, but to this day, I have not been to Albania. It is one of my longed-for destinations and presumably will remain so.

A distant echo of divinity or transcendence is evident in many of my films. Even some of the titles, it seems to me, bespeak that: *Every Man for Himself and God Against All; Aguirre, the Wrath of God; The Lord and the Laden; Huie's Sermon; God's Angry Man; and Bells from the Deep*, a film about faith and superstition in Russia. In 2017, I had a public conversation with the curator Paul Holdengräber, whose deep appreciation of cultural connections I greatly admire. It was called "Ecstasy and Terror in the Mind of God." Among other things, we spoke for a long time on the Amazon jungle, that unfinished landscape created by a wrathful god. He or I, I no longer remember, finally quoted the closing passage from my book *Conquest of the Useless* about my return to the place where I had shot *Fitzcarraldo*, where God's anger became so palpable; it might have been my own description of the Almighty: "*I looked around, and there was the jungle, manifesting the same seething hatred, wrathful and steaming, while the river flowed by in majestic indifference and scornful condescension, ignoring everything: the plight of man, the burden of dreams, and the torments of time.*"

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# 11

## CAVES

There was one earlier version of this hunger for transcendence. I call it the moment of my spiritual awakening; I feel no hesitation about using such a high-flown phrase for it. It was the moment when I first began to think and feel for myself without school or upbringing. I was twelve or had just turned thirteen, and we were newly arrived in Munich. I walked past a bookstore, not looking at the display, but something there caused me to stop. I walked back to look. What I had spotted out of the corner of my eye was the picture of a horse on a book jacket, but it was not like any picture I'd ever seen. It was a book about cave paintings, and the picture was one of the celebrated wall paintings from the caves at Lascaux. I looked more closely and saw from the subtitle of the book that it contained paintings from the Upper Paleolithic made some 17,000 years ago. That made my spine tingle. I had to have the book, though it was completely unaffordable. I started to earn money as a ball boy at some tennis courts. Every week I snuck past the bookstore to check whether the book was still there. I had a terrible fear that someone else could have seen it and snapped it up. I was in the grip of panic. I surely thought the book existed in just the one copy. At the end of two months, I had enough money, and the book was still there. The shiver I felt when I opened it and turned the pages and saw the illustrations has never left me. Many decades later, I had the good fortune to make a film about the Chauvet Cave. This cave was only discovered in 1994 and was perfectly preserved, so that its paintings looked as though they had been painted yesterday, and not 32,000 years

ago. There was intense competition to film it, particularly from French directors, all good, serious candidates, and I didn't think I was in with much of a chance because the French think very territorially when it comes to their *patrimoine*. All the experts who had explored the cave were French, and my first hurdle was to gain their approval, then that of the regional government of the Ardèche. The third hurdle was the French minister of culture, who received me very graciously and declared quite unexpectedly how much he as a young man had been impressed and delighted by my films. Before entering politics, he had been an actor, author, and director, and had seen my films as a critic. He was just about to go into his well-prepared "but unfortunately" when I interrupted him. I simply said that I knew I had the chops, as did several other directors, but I also had had a fire within me since my thirteenth year. I told him about my experience of awakening. Thereupon the minister leaned right across the table and shook my hand. "Not another word. I've heard enough. You'll make the film." His name is Frédéric Mitterrand; he is a nephew of the former president. For form's sake, and presumably also to protect the interests of the French Republic, I had to enter into a contract with the French state. "What is your idea of an honorarium?" asked Mitterrand. I replied: "One euro, and I will donate it to the state as soon as I get it." *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* from 2010 remains my only work in 3D. For me, it was the fulfillment of a dream.

The constraints on filming were severe. Because the hundred thousand annual visitors to Lascaux had contaminated the cave with their exhalations, they wanted to do the thing properly in Chauvet. In Lascaux a fungus had settled on the paintings that ate away their colors whereupon Lascaux had been closed, just like a series of other caves like Altamira in Spain. The cave at Chauvet had been blocked off by a rockfall for some 28,000 years and sealed airtight; the atmosphere in it had remained unaltered since. The heavy foolproof steel door at its entrance should be opened and closed as little as possible. When filming, we were allowed to open it briefly once when going in and then open and close it when finally leaving. We were to take with us only what we could carry. Myself included, there were to be no

more than four persons working in the cave at any time, and then for no more than four hours a day. The filming was to take less than a week. One could move about only on a metal grid that was two feet wide, and our lights were not to create any heat—all of these perfectly reasonable requirements. There was no possibility of support from outside, because that would have meant opening and closing the steel door. We therefore built a very small 3-D camera, which consisted of two cameras in parallel that were no bigger than matchboxes. At the time, miniature equipment didn't yet exist, and the digital storage of the data was very difficult. I say all this because the circumstances required that we have a team of extraordinary quality, where each member was ready to take on the work of another at a moment's notice if required. With me were cameraman Peter Zeitlinger; his assistant, Erik Söllner, both Austrians, resolute and strong and experienced; and the Estonian digital guru Kaspar Kallas. Kaspar had made his own films, developed important parts of the software on James Cameron's *Avatar*, and was also an excellent cameraman. Sometimes, instead of him, my extraordinary sound man Eric Spitzer-Marlyn would come along. He started a career as a pop singer at age seventeen and performed for full stadiums in Austria. His early records show him as a teenie heartthrob, lonesome with his only friend, his guitar, at the side of a road. Now he is a composer and runs his own sound studio. I generally did the lighting with a portable flat panel when we filmed conversations with experts. Minutes before we went down into the cave, we tested all the equipment the way pilots of passenger aircraft do before takeoff, but on one of our filming days on the steep descent to the cave's lower level, one of the batteries for the data storage broke. It had an unusual voltage that nothing else could replicate. What to do? Climbing back up to the surface would have meant opening the door. That would have meant the end, after a few minutes, of an entire filming day. The three men on the team came up with a plan. Kneeling on the narrow iron grid, they disassembled a battery charge belt. The only tools we had were a fine screwdriver and a Swiss Army penknife, and I, as an extra here, held the torch while the three of them worked. In the space of an hour, they had built a new battery, and we were

able to start filming. I go into such detail because I always had incredibly highly qualified technical teams that were always ready to cope with whatever obstacles were put in their path. Conditions in the cave were touch and go. Ideally, we would not so much as breathe, and a sneeze might have blown away fine deposits of carbon from the partly black paintings. In one place on the sandy ground, there was the print of a child, or really there were two because parallel to it were the marks of a wolf. The great entrance to the cave had been used in prehistoric times by people and large mammals, especially by a now-extinct species of cave-dwelling bear that hibernated there. We were unable to investigate the prints, but I am still haunted by the speculation: Had a wolf pursued the child, had they walked companionably side by side, or had the wolf left its traces hundreds or even thousands of years later? The bewildering thing about some of the cave paintings is that you sometimes come upon the picture of a mammoth or a woolly rhino that was completed at a much later date. Carbon dating has shown us that a painting begun by one painter was completed more than five thousand years later by another, which is as though a painting begun before the time of the first pharaohs had been recently completed.

I was always fascinated by the way collective memory is sometimes evinced from the depths of time. Why do we say “Bless you” or “Gesundheit” or “Santé” when someone sneezes but never when they cough? It’s probably a hangover from the plague, of which sneezing was an advance symptom. Why are cemeteries in so many cultures fenced in? Maybe from archaic times when they wanted to confine evil spirits? Why is it that in many cultures a man carries his wife over the threshold? I assume it’s a reference to olden days when men went out to steal women, as in the rape of the Sabines in the early history of Rome. The great Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*, which goes back to the oral traditions of very old times, describes such a theft. In the cave at Chauvet, I saw references to two fascinating traditions. There is the picture of a galloping bison in which the paleolithic painter wanted to show dynamic movement. The bison has eight legs. Thirty thousand years later, in the Icelandic Edda, we find a description of

the chief of the gods, Odin. His horse, Sleipnir, is the swiftest of all because it gallops on eight legs.

Then, deep inside the Chauvet Cave is a pendulous piece of rock in roughly the form of a pine cone. On it is the only depiction of a human in the cave: the bottom half of a naked woman embraced by the hooves of a bison. Thirty thousand years later, Picasso made his series of lithographs of *Femme et Minotaure*, every bit as though he had been inspired by the cave at Chauvet. But Picasso—of whom I have no great opinion—had been long dead when the cave was discovered. I ask myself, though, is there something like buried memory within families? Or, to put it differently, are there images that slumber within us and are sometimes set free by some sort of jolt? I believe so, and somehow all my works have pursued such images, whether it was the ten thousand windmills of Crete in my first feature film, *Signs of Life*, or the steamship that is lugged over a mountain, the central metaphor of my film *Fitzcarraldo*. I know it's a wonderful metaphor, but what it means I am unable to say.

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## THE VALLEY OF THE TEN THOUSAND WINDMILLS

The windmills of Crete I literally stumbled upon. It happened in the course of one of my early enterprises; I am no longer certain of the timing. I had visited Crete previously, at the end of my schooldays, with friends from the “group of saints,” but then we were mostly in the center and west of the island, in Rethymnon and Chania, and Hora Sfakion in the south. And I went there again on the trail of my grandfather Rudolf; I think this was immediately after I finished school. I had Cretan friends in Munich, with whom I had started speaking Greek. Then in the summer I joined a convoy of trucks that had been bought used in Munich and each had a car or two loaded on board. The aim was to get them to Athens, and then on a ferry to Crete, to sell them there. I had chipped in with some money and knew I would make enough from the deal to get across to Africa. I remember leaving Munich and heading south for Salzburg as the taillight of the column with an elderly Cretan farmer in front of me who had never seen such a straight stretch of road. He drove in squiggles, as though he were on the hairpins of his native island.

When I finally reached Crete, I was invited to stay with him in the village of Ano Archanes. I was offered the practically never used “best room” that was only used for official occasions like weddings and wakes. I slept on the floor. I noticed how, when the window shutters were pushed open, there was something jumping on the floor like champagne bubbles. In the light, these turned out to be fleas, thousands of them, which I bore

uncomplainingly so as not to embarrass my hosts. Ano Archanes is situated on the lowest slopes of the island's highest mountain, Psiloritis, the Mount Ida of antiquity, the birthplace of Zeus; with a few of the young men, I went hunting on its slopes for wild goats and partridges. Not long ago, I ran into an old photo of myself, shotgun in hand. There is a partridge dangling from my belt, and I have a knotted handkerchief on my head against the sun. I am standing there in profile, probably to show off my partridge. I had grown into a fit-looking young fellow, but shortly after, in Africa, sick, I was frighteningly reduced. There is another picture of me in Crete riding on a donkey that I had hired for a few weeks. I called him Gaston, I can't for the life of me recall why, though I know that it seemed important to me at the time. I walked practically the entire length of the oblong island, not along the coast but through the mountains of the interior, trotting after the donkey that carried water and some food. I was completely alone and relished the fact that I was now an independent adult. When Gaston stopped, so did I, and when, after some geeing-up, he decided to go on, so did I. In the far east of the island, I came to a ridge where the rock suddenly fell away. Perfectly unprepared from one moment to the next, I saw below me a wide valley full of thousands of windmills all in motion, their white canvas sails turning, like a meadow full of thousands of crazy spinning flowers, a field of demented daisies. There was no village, no hut, just these windmills. I sat down, thunderstruck. I knew that this cannot be, this cannot be. I had a dreadful fear that I had gone mad because the sight wouldn't go away, as a mirage would. I remember thinking: *this is too soon, too soon*. When I am as old as my grandfather then, presumably, I will follow him into madness. But this is too soon. I somehow collected myself when I started to hear quiet creaking sounds from down below. Could it be real after all? Did I still have my wits about me? I finally climbed down, and from close to, I could see that they were indeed windmills, all of them pumping up groundwater to irrigate the plain. It was called "the valley of the ten thousand windmills." Only a year ago, the mayor of the nearby town of Lasithi wrote to me to ask if I would support efforts to restore the windmills

to their original state. They all have been demolished and replaced by electric motors.

Three years later, I wrote the screenplay for *Signs of Life*. The protagonist, a World War Two German soldier with a head wound, is detailed with a couple of comrades to guard a fort on which, in boredom, they set fireworks improvised from explosives. On a reconnaissance expedition in the mountains, the patrol comes to the spot where I first saw the windmills. At the sight of them, the soldier becomes mentally unbalanced and starts shooting wildly about him. From the fort, he attacks the harbor and the town with horizontally aimed fireworks, makes war on friend and foe alike, and finally shoots at the rising sun. In the end, he has to be overpowered by his own men. The story was inspired by a novella by the Romantic author Achim von Arnim called *The Crazed Invalid in Fort Ratonneau*, but my plot went off in another direction. I can remember the novella begins with an old major who has lost his leg reminiscing at his fireside. He talks himself into such a rage, he fails to notice when his wooden leg catches fire.

There are various recurring tropes in my films that are almost always derived from personal experience. On the whole, films are not inclined to be abstract conceptions. There has been no shortage of speculation, for instance, on the empty, driverless car that goes around in circles in my film *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970). There are other circles in other films, and they all go back to the time when I was seventeen or eighteen. I had a job as a spot welder on the nightshift, which wasn't badly paid as night work was paid extra, but then I had to be at school in the daytime, which in my exhausted condition I barely registered. There was also danger money because we were continually exposed to flying particles of burning metal. I always worked in a leather apron, but late at night, I got less careful, and some of the glowing scraps would bounce off the apron and not infrequently land inside my shoes at more than a thousand degrees centigrade. I would hit the roof with agony, but by the time I had pulled my shoes off, I had burns each time. The insides of my feet were always blistered.

I gave up the spot-welding job at the time of the Oktoberfest in Munich to work as a parking warden. That was really well-paid work. For the sixteen days of the beer fest, the area is overrun by hundreds of thousands of visitors, but back then, in 1959 or 1960, a small section of the meadow wasn't filled with roller coasters and merry-go-rounds and shooting booths and beer tents but was left as grass for cars to park. This work was even more lucrative because some friends of mine had devised a way of selling each ticket twice over. We were issued blocks of a hundred tickets but managed to reuse them. There was always a torn-off part that was stuck under the windshield wipers, and the other was given to the driver. What we did was talk the drivers into giving us back their part, then at night we pressed the usually crumpled tickets flat and stuck them together. And so we sold them a second time—which we called “doubles”—and some we even used a third time and these were “trebles.” The beer tents stopped serving at 10 p.m., and by midnight, the place was usually completely empty. In those two hours, we earned our money as parking wardens. At that time, drunk driving was viewed as a technical offense; there were no seat belts, and traffic lights hadn't really caught on. But after 10 p.m., I was dealing with drunks, hundreds of them, sometimes crammed into cars and everyone completely plastered. These car groups were always aggressive and occasionally dangerous. Sometimes I was sideswiped by starting cars when I tried to stop them and persuade the drivers to take a taxi. It was basically too much responsibility for me to handle; remember, I was still a schoolboy at the time. The police were nowhere around; they were busy dealing with fights and blackouts. In cases where the drivers were so drunk that every yard they traveled could be fatal to themselves and others, I would demand the keys, but that didn't often get results. So I reached in through the open window and snatched them. Some of the drivers would try to sock me as I reached in. One man bit me in the arm. Another tore out a hank of my hair. Anyway, we got the daredevil drivers out of their cars and laid them out on the grass in a row. Usually, they would fall asleep like babies. Long after midnight, the police would show up, and I would give them the keys to the cars. The drunks were taken to cells to sober up.

Before then, if I was bored, I sometimes used to take some of the cars for a spin. I didn't yet have a license, so I contented myself with driving around and around the empty beer fest meadows; I didn't trust myself to go out on actual roads. One night in one of the cars, I found a so-called spider, a rubber cable with a hook attached. I turned the steering wheel as far as it would go, then fixed the cable to it and had myself driven around and around in circles without having to touch the wheel. Then I had the idea of putting a weight on the accelerator pedal, found a stone that did the trick, and got out. From that time on, I usually had at least one driverless car going endlessly around and around, sometimes two. That image etched itself into my brain.

Elements from such personal depths had a habit of popping up in my stories. My mother once described it in an interview like this: *"All the time he was at school, Werner never learned anything. He never read the books he was supposed to read; he never studied. It seemed he never knew the things he was meant to know. But then, in fact, Werner always knew everything. His senses were extraordinary. He could pick out some note or sound and ten years later remember it exactly. He would talk about it and use it in some way. He's completely incapable of explaining anything. He knows, he sees, he understands, but he can't explain. That's not in his nature. With him, everything goes in. And if it comes out again, then it will be in some altered form."* It's not an easy matter, quoting one's own mother, and I don't think she's always right. I do think I've learned to explain a thing or two, maybe. But I have a deep aversion to too much introspection, to navel-gazing.

I'd rather die than go to an analyst, because it's my view that something fundamentally wrong happens there. If you harshly light every last corner of a house, the house will be uninhabitable. It's like that with your soul; if you light it up, shadows and darkness and all, people will become "uninhabitable." I am convinced that it's psychoanalysis—along with quite a few other mistakes—that has made the twentieth century so terrible. As far as I'm concerned, the twentieth century, in its entirety, was a mistake.

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# 13

## CONGO

**T**he time after leaving school was important to me in another way as well. From Crete, I took a boat to Alexandria. I took the cheapest class there was and slept on deck so my money would go further. As soon as I set foot on the African continent in Alexandria, I was tricked. A uniformed official demanded a landing fee of ten dollars and gave me a receipt. Only after I'd paid did I notice that no one else was asked to pay this fee. The Egyptians, of course, didn't; and a few Greeks laughed at the deception. From that moment on, I was more careful.

Egypt is somehow behind a veil in my memory. Cairo, then by train along the Nile to Luxor and the Valley of Kings. Then on past Aswan toward Sudan. South of Aswan, the Nile is no longer navigable because of rapids; between Shellal and Wadi Halfa I had to travel on a dusty truck. Then Khartoum and Omdurman. What was impelling me was my curiosity about the Congo. The country had declared its independence the previous year, 1960, and was now sinking into chaos and tribal warfare. All of its institutions had failed, and law and order no longer existed. Furthermore, there was fighting between the rightist forces under Tshombe and Mobutu and socialists like Lumumba, who had been murdered. Somewhere at the back of my interest, though not applicable in any one-for-one sort of way, was the question of how Germany, after the First World War, could have lapsed so quickly from a civilized country into the barbarism of the Nazis. In the case of the Congo, the reasons were different; they were bound up with the ravages of colonialism, but the concrete collapse of institutional

order was something I needed to understand. How was it possible that cannibalism was returning? In eastern Congo, political figures had surfaced who were not trained by Western elites but who represented rooted African traditions, people like Gizenga, Mulele, and Gbenye. Africa, after all, had had a European ethos forced on it.

Farther up the Nile, there are no passable land routes through southern Sudan; the flooding and the swampy Nile make passage impossible. I flew in a small mail plane to Juba. From there, it wasn't far to the Congolese border. I remember the red earth everywhere, and buildings, even quite large buildings, roofed with dark rushes. In Juba I straightaway came down with amoebic dysentery, and I turned back after just one day, finally made it to Aswan in Egypt, where I sheltered in a shed for garden tools. I didn't have any insurance. Things went downhill fast. The fever made me feel so cold that I wore a sweater in spite of the heat. I had almost nothing in the way of baggage, just a half-empty duffel bag. I had fever dreams in which I saw myself swimming miles out to sea, then something was biting me in the elbow, a fish, maybe a shark. I leapt up, and a rat ran right across my face. There were more of them too. When I extended my arm, I saw that a big hole had been gnawed in my sweater. I suppose the rat was getting wool for its nest. I found a little bite wound in my cheek. My cheek swelled up, and the wound was still leaking pus weeks later and refusing to heal. My shit was bloody froth, but somehow I still tried to get some structure into my situation by bedding down on carefully spread-out newspaper sheets. In my life I've often been down and out but never as much as this. I knew I had to get out of that shed.

I remember the fierce sun outside, and later on, some men milling around. I thought I was hallucinating, but they really were speaking German. They were Siemens technicians who were building the turbines for the Aswan Dam. The dam itself had been built by Soviet engineers, but the electrical equipment was installed by Germans. A doctor gave me some shockingly powerful medication, and I returned to Cairo on a plane. From there, I made it home. My greatest good fortune, though, wasn't that as an eighteen-year-old I had survived such an illness but that I hadn't managed

to make it across the Congolese frontier. In 1992, when I was briefly the director of the Viennale film fest in Vienna, I invited the Polish writer and philosopher Ryszard Kapuściński as one of my guests. He had more knowledge of Africa than anyone I knew, and it was he as well who, a year before me, a young man himself coming from Juba, had reached eastern Congo. There he was arrested forty times in a year and a half and four times sentenced to death. I asked him what his worst day had been. The worst day went on for a week in which he was in a pit under sentence of death, and drunken soldiers were throwing poisonous snakes onto him. “In the space of a week,” said Kapuściński, putting his hand to his head, “my hair turned white.” His hair wasn’t just white, it was as white as driven snow. “I want you to get on your knees,” he said, “and thank God you were never there.” Apart from him, there was only one other reporter who emerged from there alive.

I wanted to make a science fiction film with him, but I wanted it to be different. Science fiction projects technical advances into a futuristic world, or aliens visit us to destroy us with superior technology and futuristic weapons, but I was fascinated—and he just as much—with the idea that the future might be one in which we had *lost* all our technical prowess, just as, after the fall of the Roman Empire, almost every innovation of technology, medicine, science, mathematics, and literature was lost. For the better part of the next thousand years, only scraps of the old knowledge survived, hidden in monasteries or preserved in translations into Arabic. The worst loss of all was the fire that destroyed the library of Alexandria, which housed the entire store of antique knowledge and literature and philosophy. Kapuściński and I had imagined a world, which he had seen in whole and I in part, where hotel elevators no longer functioned and water collected in their shafts; where hoteliers accompanied their guests upstairs with a light bulb in their jacket pocket, which they screwed in in the room and took back when the guest checked out; a world where traffic jams would last a week and you could only reach the airport on foot; where the computer terminals that supposedly controlled flight schedules sprouted creepers; where there was no petrol in gas stations; where currency was so destroyed

by inflation that you needed a wheelbarrow full of pressed banknotes to buy a chicken; a world where in a military coup drunken soldiers could not shoot the members of a cabinet tied to posts because they kept missing; finally they managed to hit them in the knee or somewhere, then, at the end of an hour the ministers were somehow all dead; a world where, if water for once came out of the taps, you had to run to fill pots and bowls and even bathtubs because the army had blocked off the supply and was selling water from tanker trucks to the highest bidder. A world in which no one had any interest in reading or information except the crudest conspiracy theories. A world, then, that didn't need to be imagined, just observed, because it had already existed for ages. Kapuściński thought about eastern Congo as a location, or the Sudan and its borders with Ethiopia and Kenya, or some banana republic in Central America, but we threw out all that because the countries, at least in Africa, were all racked by civil wars. Not long before, Kapuściński, riding in a truck in tall elephant grass, had been ambushed and shot at. In addition, there was the fact that, wherever one ended up filming, it would be supposed that one wanted to damage the reputation of a particular country or group of people. The film remained unmade.

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## DR. FU MANCHU

I was deeply convinced that I wouldn't live to my eighteenth birthday. Once I had safely passed it, it seemed out of the question that I would ever be older than twenty-five. The result was that I began making films of which I could assume they would be all that was left of me. Why not dare to find forms that had never existed? *Last Words*, a short in modern Greek from 1967, with its endless, compulsive repetitions; *Fata Morgana*, from 1970 in which I filmed mirages in the Sahara; stories like *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, also from 1970, probably my most radical work, in which all the actors are little people. It was also clear to me that—in almost complete ignorance of the cinema of others—I would have to come up with a cinema of my own. The world of the Alps at Sachrang was, after all, one we'd partly made up. We grew up with our own games and our own toys. For instance, there was a type of slingshot we called the Thunderbolt. We cut a flat slice out of a big beech log and carved it into a dart about twenty inches long and two or three inches wide. It was flat on the underside and slightly convex on top, which gave it dynamic lift, a little like the wing of an airplane. Of course, we didn't know anything about aerodynamics. At its center, the dart had a hook, but we didn't use a bow to shoot it; it was far too short. We whipped it from us with an eye on the end of the rope that held the hook of the dart. It wasn't possible to aim the thing; the Thunderbolt just flew off anywhere, but it stayed in the air a long time, almost like a Frisbee. Our Thunderbolt flew farther than any arrow from a bow.

The first two films I saw, projected onto a bedsheet in the schoolhouse at Sachrang, didn't impress me. The first was about Inuits building an igloo, but I could straightaway see that they didn't have much of a clue on how to work with ice and packed snow. Perhaps they had actors playing the part of Inuits. The second one was much more interesting; it showed Pygmies, in Cameroon, I believe, building a hanging bridge from lianas across a jungle river. Their construction was impressively woven, a piece of art, in effect. Later too, unlike my brothers and my friends, I didn't find films especially impressive when I started to go to the cinema in Munich. When I understood what life had in store for me, shortly after my fourteenth birthday, the time I converted to Catholicism and began traveling on foot, I just knew I would have to make films. Only it took a while before I was ready to take on the job, because I sensed it would be a difficult life. My knowledge of films was also severely limited. We sometimes watched films like *Zorro* or *Dr. Fu Manchu*, of which there were several sequels. Most likely I saw a western in Heilbronn when I was twelve with my friends Zef and Schinkel. Zef, the colorblind one, then replayed the showdown at the end, because I refused to believe that the hero, an ordinary cowboy who only wanted to protect his herd from the rustlers, could deal with eight villains encircling him with revolvers drawn. It would only take one of them to pull the trigger and lay him out cold. Zef set us up in a circle around him, and threw himself horizontally into the air so as not to offer a target, and at the same time fired two imaginary Colts at us, whirling around and around. His reenactment, I thought, was impressively wild but not quite convincing. In spite of that, we believed implicitly that what we saw on screen was real. We talked to the screen too. When feather headdresses loomed over a horizon in the Munich cinema, we would warn the settlers in their covered wagons: "Watch out, the Apaches are coming!" Then in one of the *Dr. Fu Manchu* films, I noticed something the others hadn't seen. In an exchange between goodies and baddies, one egregious villain on Dr. Fu Manchu's side was picked off on a rock. He tumbled down into the depths, turning over and over. Twenty minutes later, something peculiar happened: in another fight, we saw all kinds—good and bad—

meeting their ends. A few had taken refuge in a gulch between rocks, and I saw the same villain plummeting to his doom. It was maybe done a little quicker and took only a couple of seconds this time, but the man took off into the air in exactly the same way, with one foot out. No one else saw it, but I was convinced it was the same shot. For me, that was the moment I understood there were shots and cuts in a film. From that time on, I watched differently. How was a story told, how was suspense created, how was a film constructed? To this day, I can learn only from bad films. The good ones I watch in the same spirit in which I watched when I was a kid. The great ones, even when I see them many times, are just an enigma.

My mother always had her doubts about me making films. In her view, I was too shy and introverted. But there was something in me that the Catholics call certainty of salvation. She wrote to me when I was on the road somewhere that I should find a solid basis for my wild plans and apprentice myself to a photographer; that way I could get a job in a film lab, and that might give me the chance of becoming someone's assistant director. There was as yet no such thing as film school, otherwise I'm sure she would have recommended that. From her time in Geiselgasteig in the Bavarian film studios, she knew a props man, whom she persuaded to get me into the studio for a day to see what the profession looked like. On the day of my visit, a TV show for a New Year's special—still months away—was being recorded, with a host in white tails and top hat. He was the emcee for the whole thing and did some song and dance numbers as well. I watched as he filmed the final shot accompanied by a ballet of elves, they too all in white and sprinkled with glitter. As the final music played, they all turned away from the camera and danced on tiptoe to the back of the set, where the number of the new year was beginning to flash on and off. While waltzing away, the emcee was supposed to turn back to the onlookers, then blow a kiss to the camera. He lost his step. The scene was repeated a dozen times, then there were about a dozen more takes, for what reason I wasn't sure. The self-importance of everyone involved—behind the camera as much as in front of it—was insufferable. It was clear to me that this was not what I had in mind.

A few years later, when I was thinking of making short films, there was the question of whether I should start my own production company. For me, the answer was clear. I would never find a producer for my kind of films, so I would have to do everything myself. That's why I started earning money while I was still at school. There was one moment that is fresh in my memory in all its detail: a film producer had reacted positively to an outline I sent, but I knew I mustn't on any account show myself. I was fifteen at the time but physically still a child, a growth spurt and puberty came late. The negotiations took the form of an exchange of letters, then there was a phone call. I think it was probably the first phone call in my life; I was desperate not to be seen. Today, it's hard to imagine. But finally, all the procrastination had to end. I was summoned to their Munich offices. In the anteroom stood a heavy quasi-antique camera from the thirties on a mighty tripod. The secretary looked at me in surprise. I was ushered into a large splendid office. Leather chairs, a heavy walnut table, two men at it, the two producers. Both looked past me into the anteroom, craned their necks; it was as though someone had visited them and brought his kid and hadn't personally shown up yet. But there was no one behind me. It took them a few seconds to understand. I was about to introduce myself, but I didn't get a chance because one of the producers started laughing aloud and slapping his thigh. Then the other stood and laughed in my face: "Oh, they want to make films in kindergarten now!" Without a sound, I turned on my heel and walked out. I didn't waste a second feeling sorry for myself. I just thought: *These people are cretins and don't have a clue about anything.* My resolve only strengthened inside me. Looking back, I am nothing but grateful that nothing came of the meeting. Hard to imagine where it might have got me, plus my project was completely half-baked. I was like a funambulist with abysses on either side, but I strode on as though I was on a wide road and not a narrow wire.

There seemed no alternative to starting my own firm. My mother viewed the prospect with concern. Finally, she suggested I consult the husband of one of her friends in Aschau and get his advice. This man was one of the great financial bosses in the early history of the Federal Republic. His name

was Professor Wagner; he had held posts in government and was now, as far as I remember, a big wheel in the Montanunion, which eventually became the European Union. He was a man of great personal authority and a financial mover and shaker, no doubt about it. Wagner listened briefly to what I had to say, then gave me a lecture in his booming voice on the complexity of the film industry. I was surely not in my right mind; I needed to go away and study economics and probably law as well, and then learn something about the operation of finance, ideally by working in some big company. I remember the bearskins on the walls of his drawing room, trophies from hunting expeditions he'd gone on in the Carpathians with the leader of Romania. My ears were still ringing when I left. I still went ahead and founded my company. My father too had got wind of my plans. He wrote me a closely argued letter, giving me his views on the state of world cinema; was it worth getting into an industry that produced so much crap? He also told me plainly that I didn't have the assertiveness that was required in such a line of work.

There was an institute for film and television, where I found people my own age and with a similar outlook. We were determined to support one another in our projects. The institute was a predecessor of the Munich Film Academy, and I was drawn to it because it had cameras, sound equipment, and cutting tables. If you were accepted, you were given the equipment for free, but all my applications were turned down, and I had to look on while clearly talentless individuals kept getting cameras. Not one of the people I knew there ever made it to anything, with one exception, Uwe Brandner, who started off as a musician, then made a few films, and ended up as a writer. I learned the basics about cinema in about a week from reading the thirty or forty pages on radio, film, and TV in an encyclopedia. I still think that's about all there is to know. Studying literature won't make you a poet; being able to type won't either. I grasped the workings of a camera, how the film moved, what an optical soundtrack was. From there, I could deduce how to do a time lapse or slow motion. I still needed a camera, though. These were still the days of celluloid and mechanical cameras. I stole my first one. There has been a lot of talk about that, and various versions of the

story are out there. I wasn't blameless. But the deed was relatively straightforward. I was in the storeroom of the institute, where there was always someone present, working on maintenance. One day, though, I was all alone there. At first I didn't even realize it. Then after some time, I noticed the quiet and looked around. There was a shelf that had four or five cameras on it, and I picked up one I liked the look of. Then another. I looked through the lenses. Because there was still no one around, I walked outside and tried adjusting the focus on one or two faraway objects. Then, since I was outside, it occurred to me that I might just walk off. It was a Friday. I could film all weekend and return the camera on Monday. Then, come Monday and Tuesday, I was still filming, and I ended up just keeping the camera. I don't think the institute ever noticed. It felt to me more like expropriation than theft, or to put it differently, I was exercising a natural right to put the camera to its intended use. With it, I made my first short films: *Herakles*, *Game in the Sand*, *The Unprecedented Defence of the Fortress Deutschkreutz*, and *Precautions Against Fanatics*. The odd one out in that series is *Game in the Sand*. It's about a few village boys who drag after them a rooster in a cardboard box. I never had sufficient control of that film, and it remains the only film of mine that I never allowed to be released. I learned a lot from making it. I kept the camera for a long time, but in an interview once, I babbled something about having gone on to make a lot of subsequent films with it as well. That story acquired a life of its own, as is apt to happen in the media. I did my bit too, confirming or rejecting the more colorful versions as the fancy took me.

At about that time, my brother Lucki finished school, and like my older brother, started working in a timber company. He too made a rapid ascent, but he moved to Essen, then to Northern Germany. Because he was five years younger than Till and I, he had never taken part in our soccer games and other episodes. In his time in Munich, he sang in a celebrated boys' choir and briefly thought about going into music. At the age of nineteen, he was a little freaked out because he could see his business career so clearly mapped out ahead of him all the way to eventual retirement. So he decided to quit and see the world instead. He had a VW Beetle and planned to drive

to Turkey. I urged him to be more ambitious and range farther afield, and he ended up driving from Anatolia on to Afghanistan, then over the Khyber Pass to Pakistan and India, and from there to Nepal, and finally to Indonesia, where he got a job teaching English at a private school. This, to him, was an unforgettable time of independence and adventure. However distant we were physically for large parts of our lives, he eventually joined me when I was busy with the preparations for *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* in Peru. From Indonesia, he came through Mexico to Lima. He became a pivotal figure in my work and enterprise, providing organization, collaboration, and initiatives. Without his intercession, I would probably never have directed an opera, and without his far-sightedness, there would not be the charitable foundation that today administers all my films and literary works. He and I complemented each other extremely well. I think he was a splendid counterbalance to me over the decades, acting strategically while I was putting out fires. I was on the front line checking all the advance outposts; he was the calm presence, cleverly pulling strings in the rear. For anyone who felt broken, hopeless, or desperate, he was always the last resort.

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## JOHN OKELLO

Reading old letters of Lucki's I came upon exciting descriptions of his sojourns in South India, in Goa, in Kathmandu, in Jakarta. And by chance too there were several letters from Field Marshal John Okello, who influenced the characterization of my Aguirre in *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*. Okello, an orphan, came from northern Uganda. He grew up very poor, made his way by laboring, and only later managed a couple of years at school. He embarked on a wandering life in Uganda and Kenya, and was apprenticed to a carpenter. In Uganda he served a two-year prison term for an unspecified sexual offense he always denied. Later, he worked as a mason, a trader, and finally as a traveling preacher. He came to the island of Zanzibar where, still very young, he was radicalized. He had extraordinary gifts as an orator and organizer of farmworkers. Zanzibar was historically the great Arab-run slave-trading post in East Africa. The Arabs were still the dominant power in the twentieth century, though they constituted a small minority of the otherwise African population. Okello organized a rebellion against the Arabs, which began without weapons or uniforms or training or money. On January 12, 1964, with a ragtag army of about four hundred men, he struck. Their first need was for weapons, so they stole the sentry's rifle at a police station and stormed the arsenal. At the last moment before this attack, almost his entire force melted away because they were afraid of how the matter might end. He had about thirty men who were still following him. At the age of twenty-seven, Okello declared himself a field marshal and appointed generals, brigadiers, and

colonels as the fancy took him, and in the space of a few hours, the Africans of Zanzibar had thrown in their lot with him because they sensed that the dynamics were on the side of the rebellion. The Arab sultan escaped to the mainland on his yacht, but there were bloody massacres of Arabs by Okello's troops and the population at large. For a few days, Okello was famous—at least insomuch as the Western press mentioned him on the inside pages among “miscellaneous international news.” In Munich, I was struck by the weirdness of the speeches he gave on a small local radio station. He challenged the chief of police to hand himself in over the air: “*Or else I will see myself compelled to visit you. In such a case, things would be more terrible than any living creature could bear.*” I seem to remember reports of his circling over the island in a small plane, transmitting his radio broadcast: “*Anyone who steals a bar of soap, or who eats one grain of rice too much, will be thrown into prison for a hundred and fifty years!*” He gave the sultan an ultimatum: “*You've got twenty minutes to surrender, otherwise we'll have no option but to scrub you from the face of the earth. You've got twenty minutes to kill your wives and children and then yourself. Should you fail to do so, I will come and kill you in person and your chickens and goats and I will burn your body with a furious hungry fire.*” My Aguirre speaks in the tones of Okello:

#### AGUIRRE

I am the great traitor. There must be no other. Anyone who even thinks about deserting this mission will be cut up into 198 pieces. Those pieces will be trampled upon until what is left can be used only to paint walls. Whoever takes one grain of corn or one drop of water . . . more than his ration, will be locked up for 155 years. If I, Aguirre, want the birds to drop dead from the trees . . . then the birds will drop dead from the trees. I am the Wrath of God. The earth I pass will see me and tremble.

At a press conference two days after his uprising, Okello explained that he had had the rank of brigadier general for the past ten years as a fighter in the Mau Mau independence movement in Kenya and had worked as an interpreter of dreams. The entire rebel hierarchy including the leader, Jomo Kenyatta, had had their dreams transcribed and interpreted by him. To me, this sounds doubtful, as Okello would have been no more than seventeen, and because the Kikuyu-dominated Mau Mau would hardly have looked to an outsider from the Ugandan Acholi tribe, who had only just begun to learn the principal language of Kenya, Swahili. Following the triumph of his revolution in Zanzibar, Okello repatriated the former prime minister Karume from exile on the mainland and restored him to office, but Zanzibar and Tanganyika on the mainland were planning a fusion of both their states, to be called Tanzania. At the end of a few weeks spent on the mainland himself, Okello was prevented from returning to Zanzibar. They wanted to be rid of him. At this point, he becomes hard to trace. He probably returned to Uganda alone. He wandered around impoverished, sometimes, by his own account, begging to survive. He was last seen in public in 1971, in the company of the new military dictator of Uganda, Idi Amin. Thereafter, all trace of him was lost.

Two years previously, I had made a film in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda for an international organization of doctors that was in some ways a forerunner of Médecins Sans Frontières; the film was called *The Flying Doctors of East Africa*. The cameraman was Thomas Mauch, who had worked on my film shot on Cos called *Signs of Life*, and with whom I went on to make a whole series of films, among them *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*. Mauch was a formative figure for me, ready for everything, secure in his style, with an extraordinary aesthetic sense but at the same time firm and self-assured as to the substance and dynamics of a scene. Cameramen are my eyes. I have worked with the very best—Thomas Mauch, Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein, later Peter Zeitlinger, with whom I made my last twenty-eight films. It's always cinematographers who set the tone for a film team. After we'd finished our 1969 film about the flying doctors, Thomas Mauch went with me to Uganda—to look for John Okello. We drove right across Kenya

to Uganda because I had heard rumors that Okello might be in northern Uganda, where he hailed from. We reached the small town of Lira, where we asked around and finally found some of his relatives, who seemed somehow reluctant to give us information. The police noticed us, which was something I had already had bad experiences with in the making of my film *Fata Morgana*, when I had been picked up several times with my small team in Cameroon. That wasn't pleasant, and we didn't fare any better in the Central African Republic, where my cameraman Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein and I also came down simultaneously with malaria and bilharzia. We didn't stay long in Lira with the interested police. Mauch remembers how we slept in the car somewhere and woke up in the morning to find children's faces pressed against the windows on all sides, silently staring at us. I left a message with Okello's relations with my German address—and lo and behold, the "field marshal" got in touch with me some months later. In several letters, he urged me to translate his book *Revolution in Zanzibar* and get it published across Europe. He had written the book during a fifteen-month jail term in Kenya, at the end of which he was repatriated to Uganda. He also offered to play the lead in a film about himself and asked about his fee. But none of that came to pass. He was presumably murdered in 1971 by Idi Amin, and in any case, the character I had in mind was a Spanish conquistador. But there is an echo of Okello in the deranged monologues of Aguirre. There is also a Black slave in the film whom the conquerors take with them. I gave him the name Okello.

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## PERU

**L**ucki came to Lima from another world. The shockingly wealthy daughter of one of the top brass in Indonesia had wanted to marry him, and he was relieved to have eluded that fate. But there were no telephone communications. When he arrived, we didn't know. There was no one to pick him up at the airport, no one manning our little downtown office. I had just set off for the jungle on the other side of the Andes. The rains were so heavy, though, that they canceled the flight. I returned to the city in the middle of the night and there ran into my brother, whom I hadn't seen for years. The joy of the meeting is still palpable to me today. Lucki straightaway took the initiative, brought order to everything, and provided a functioning bookkeeping system, which wasn't a straightforward matter as some agreements had been made with parties who couldn't read or write and various documents had been washed away in tropical rain. He tried to bring the financing under control, but that was almost hopeless as there practically wasn't any. The entire budget of the film was some \$380,000, which was a joke for a big film set in a jungle in the middle of the sixteenth century complete with costumes, weapons, llamas, and rafts, not to mention some four hundred or so Quechua-speaking highland Indigenous extras. If you look at the film from the point of view of today's "production values," then I contend that no one would touch the project for anything less than fifty million dollars. The filming was done on three barely accessible Amazon tributaries, and the main actor was the maniacal wild man Klaus Kinski. We were constantly in financial straits, the cash flow from Germany

was not functioning, transfers often took weeks to arrive. One night, when we were really up against it, Lucki went to Miraflores, the affluent suburb of Lima, and went from house to house offering a deal. Because practically everyone there had a dollar account in the States to keep money hidden from the Peruvian tax authorities, they were interested in getting outside money directly funneled into the United States. Lucki said he needed fifty thousand dollars' worth of Peruvian soles right away. In return, he would have that sum wired from Germany to the United States with an extra 10 percent on top as a reward for so much trust; the sum would arrive within forty-eight hours. People in Lima had read about my project in the newspapers, but who was going to sign up for it in the middle of the night in response to someone knocking on doors? Lucki, though, had a natural gift of creating trust, which he knew better than to abuse. A very young entrepreneur, Joe Koechlin von Stein, took him up on the offer. He needed dollars because he was planning a rock concert with Carlos Santana. With no more guarantee than a handshake, he handed Lucki the soles the next day, and the project was saved for the time being. Meanwhile, my brother Till wired fifty thousand dollars from his own funds to Joe's account in Miami. He too saved *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, though he was secretly convinced he would never see his money again. After a long delay, he did. I am friends with Joe Koechlin to this day. He built the first eco hotels in the Peruvian jungle, that was his vision long before anyone had heard of the word "ecology." He supported me later on my film *Fitzcarraldo* and was one of the producers of Les Blank's documentary *Burden of Dreams* on the making of the film. Not long ago, in 2018, he was my host when I held a workshop with a large group of young filmmakers in his jungle lodge near Puerto Maldonado.

*Aguirre, the Wrath of God* is about a band of Spanish conquistadors in the Amazonian lowland searching for the fabled golden city called El Dorado. Lope de Aguirre leads a rebellion, and in his mad pursuit of power and wealth, the expedition turns into a catastrophic sequence of illusion and self-destruction. In the end, Aguirre is left as the last survivor on a raft covered with hundreds and hundreds of small monkeys, drifting into

nowhere. From beginning to end, the filming was beset with uncertainty and risk. We all were living and drifting and shambling about on our rafts—the actors, the tiny technical crew of eight—and the real raft we were shooting was always one or two bends in the river ahead of us. We usually didn't know what was waiting for us round the next bend. As we were filming, our entire stock of negatives disappeared without trace. We had an arrangement with a shipping firm in Lima that would send the exposed negatives to Mexico City, where they would be developed, but the Mexicans swore blind that nothing ever reached them. The negatives were all we had. Without them, everything was lost. We had two suspicions: possibly the Mexican print lab had made some disastrous mistake and treated the negatives with the wrong chemicals and wrecked them, so now they were pretending that they had never received them in the first place. Lucki objected that the Mexicans stood to earn from the job and must be presumed to be telling the truth. The second possibility was the shipping company in Lima, but they showed us waybills, all properly stamped, proving that our material had indeed left the country. There hadn't been any stops either; there was nowhere the things could have got mislaid. Lucki wasn't allowed into the customs area in Lima, but on impulse, he scaled a ten-foot wire fence, and behind one shed he found all of our still-sealed film canisters on a pile of rubbish. The sensitive material had been exposed to the sun's heat for weeks. It turned out that the shippers had bribed the customs authority, hence the stamps, which allowed the shippers to collect their fee. Lucki picked up the canisters and carried them himself as hand luggage to Mexico. The situation all this time on set in the jungle was, of course, dire for me. I knew that everything we had done unrepeatably over many weeks was lost. There was only one thing for it: to carry on filming as though everything were all right. If the team had discovered that everything we had gone to so much trouble to shoot was presumably lost, then everything would have fallen apart. So I just carried on working even though I was completely aware of the folly of what I was doing. Only Lucki and I and the production chief on site, Walter Saxon, were in the picture, and we kept up an iron silence. From the perspective of most normal shoots, one

would ask: Why was there no insurance? To which I would reply that we had so little money, we couldn't afford insurance. Sometimes we had barely enough to buy food. Also, what we had shot was unique and not really repeatable.

I remember there sometimes wasn't anything to eat, and at night, I and a couple of pals set out in dugout canoes to an Indigenous village to try to find food. Once, I swapped my good shoes for a bathtub full of fish; another time I left my wristwatch as payment. I remember one night we paddled out and met at a bend in the river. None of the three of us had managed to find anything. At four in the morning, we tied our canoes together and drifted downstream and cried.

From my brothers, from Lucki especially, I learned not just to inspire confidence but to reward it unconditionally. As an example, we were in North Korea in 2015 for my film *Into the Inferno*, which I made with the volcanologist Clive Oppenheimer all over the world. After a year of negotiating, Clive managed to obtain permission to film there, which was incredible by itself. There were limits, of course, to what we could shoot, and we were under the eyes of the security people the whole time. But we were allowed to film on the crater rim of Paektu Mountain. Because that volcano is right on the border with China, conditions were even stricter than usual. A lot of North Koreans attempt to flee across the border here, and there were lots of roadblocks controlled by soldiers. I noticed that their automatic rifles were all fitted with bayonets—not decorative bayonets of the kind you'd see in the guards of honor at Arlington National Cemetery but razor-sharp ones. We see North Korea as a threat because of its atomic bombs, but they also have a million men under arms. If these hordes of fanatical fighters were spread out and unleashed across the border in a such a way that fighter planes and machine gun emplacements couldn't stop them, then the South Korean capital would be overrun in days. The infantry is a danger that no one seems to be aware of because we think it's out of date.

We filmed on the crater that is venerated as the mythical origin of the Korean people; school classes and soldiers try to visit it at least once in

their lives. While we were filming there with our expert, I suddenly heard giggling very close by and the stifled squealing of a young woman. I got the camera to pan around, and we filmed a group of soldiers taking pictures of one another with the crater lake. One young fellow had grabbed a cute female recruit around the waist and was tickling her under the arms. It was a pleasure to behold the merriment of the group, which showed an unexpectedly human side of the North Korean army. Then one of our minders took things in hand. We had to switch off the camera right away. I was informed that I had transgressed against the rules. The North Korean soldier is prepared at all times to shed his blood for his fatherland and for the beloved brother and leader of the people; nothing else was possible. What was especially heinous was that I had filmed soldiers in full uniform with their faces identifiable to the imperialist enemy; I was instructed to destroy my footage right away. The problem with this was that with our digital data storage we were technically in no position to do so. Not even the North Koreans could do that. Thereupon I was told our entire hard drive would have to be confiscated so the offending material could be destroyed. I countered that we had four days' filming on it, and to do so would be a severe blow to the film. I made a counteroffer to keep the stored footage but offered a guarantee that I would never publish the material with the soldiers. "Guarantee?" came the reply. "You mean a fifty-page written guarantee you will tear up as soon as your plane has left North Korean air space?" I said that I didn't operate like that. In many of my major films—as for instance, *Aguirre*, which was familiar to our handpicked minders—there had been no written contracts with any of my major collaborators, only verbal agreements sealed with a handshake. I had never been in breach of any such agreements. I also said that in the present case I could offer not one but three guarantees. "What are they?" I replied: "My honor, my face, and my handshake." The unexpected happened. I was allowed to keep the hard drive. And for my part, I never used the material, and never will.

In addition to my brother Lucki, another person had his first great moment on *Aguirre*. This was Walter Saxon, a young Swiss from St. Gallen, who had gone out into the world and whom I had first come across during

the preparations for my film *Even Dwarfs Started Small* on the Canary Island of Lanzarote. He ran a small hotel on the island and helped us find the car that was to drive around and around in circles. Not long after we started filming, and the car, a clapped-out thing from the fifties, had appeared in a lot of the footage, it broke down irretrievably, the engine block, I think it was. Within twenty-four hours, Sacher spotted a similar model somewhere on a country road, stopped it, and induced the owner to sell his motor. He was given some sort of replacement while Sacher built his old engine into our wreck overnight, even adapting it because it didn't quite fit. I had never seen anything like it. Walter Sacher was just indomitable. There was nothing that was too risky for him. He despised anyone who didn't work as hard as he did, which meant that the actors with their vanity often provoked him. During the *Aguirre* filming, he slept on the earth floor of a hut somewhere below Machu Picchu that belonged to a little hunchbacked Indigenous woman and her children who were surrounded by dozens of guinea pigs that were kept like chickens and, again like chickens, eaten. Later, I would sleep there myself. With him, I swam across the Urubamba River to free a mobile platform that had gotten tangled up on the other bank. I remember the slurping sound of a great whirlpool as it approached us. It was he who, when the production was in crisis, walked all night from our shoot in the gorge of the Huallaga River with three rapids one after the other and clambered up enormous slippery rocks all the way to the hamlet of Chazuta while carrying a briefcase. I saw him once work for sixty hours nonstop; afterward, I found him asleep on a pile of rocks.

Many of Kinski's outbursts were directed against him, though still more were directed against me and probably against anyone and everyone. Kinski had demanded to be close to nature and nothing else. I had several times informed him in writing that we would not be able to film the first scene, as per the screenplay, on a glacier, but that we would begin with the descent of the army into the Urubamba Valley. In spite of that, Kinski brought with him down jackets, crampons, ice axes, ropes, tents, and down sleeping bags; we didn't know what to do with them all. Then, on his instructions, we set up his tent in a clearing in the jungle, but that very first night it

rained violently and he got very wet. The choleric raged into the early hours. He wanted to celebrate nature, yes, but not get wet. We then erected a roof of woven palm fronds over his tent, but he still got damp because his breath caused condensation to form on the inside of the canvas. More ranting, more inarticulate screaming. His rage was now directed against the highland Indigenous peoples, whom we had accommodated for a few days in a large barn once used for drying tobacco leaves. Sixer had got some very simple but comfortable bunk beds built with canvas. I walked up to Kinski and coldly and calmly allowed him to pour out his rage over me. The third night, there was no alternative but to put Kinski in the only hotel near the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu. Unfortunately, all its eight rooms were occupied. At that time, no accommodation existed at the end of the little railway line up from Cuzco; my friend Joe Koechlin's beautiful hotel was yet to be built. What could we do? Sixer was able to talk the hotel owner into giving up his own room and slipping into a sort of broom closet for the night. But there in the hotel, Kinski's rampaging continued all night. He kept the whole hotel awake. The maniac hit out at his fleeing Vietnamese wife and drove her down the stairs in front of him.

Walter Sixer was my production manager on *Kaspar Hauser*, *Nosferatu the Vampyre*, *Woyzeck*, *Cobra Verde*, and many more; he was involved in almost everything I did in those years. His greatest achievement, without a doubt, was *Fitzcarraldo*. The preparations went on for three and a half years. It was he who started the construction of the two identical ships, which required a whole infrastructure—in this case, a wharf in the middle of the jungle. He had camps built for the teams of Indigenous extras and the technical crew; he hired the extras, and technically he got the steamship up and over the mountain. One of the issues between us is the way in interviews I would talk about how I'd got the ship over the mountain when it was he and his crew who did that. In my interviews, I was not speaking literally but figuratively—pars pro toto—about the way a man is driven to hunt the white whale or carry a ship over a mountain. Let me spell it out here: in actual, technical terms, it was Walter Sixer who carried the ship over the mountain. But I also want to say that there was a crisis in the shoot

when our Brazilian technician was afraid to drag the ship up the mountain because the prop—a deadpost for which the Spanish have the expressive term *muerto*—didn't seem stable enough to support it. The Brazilian quit, afraid of his own courage, I think. I then assumed responsibility myself and had a new *muerto* knocked deep into the ground. Technically, Sixer was the man who did it. This new prop would have borne the weight of five ships. Films are collaborative enterprises; it is unfortunate that sometimes friendships break, and that's what happened with Walter Sixer and me.

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## **PRIVILEGIUM MAIUS, PITTSBURGH**

**B**y the time I was twenty-one, I had made two shorts and was dead set on making a full-length feature. But at that time, it was unthinkable for a young man to be entrusted with such a project. There was no one under thirty-five in the profession anywhere. Several things came together at the same time. I was continuing to earn money for my productions and did occasional stints at the university. That was mostly fraudulent, but it got me a little extra money through a scholarship even though I wasn't learning anything. I had no time. I remember asking a fellow student to write a term paper for me, which he did quite effortlessly. In jest, he asked me what I would do for him in return, and joking back, I promised I would make him immortal. His name is Hauke Stroszek. At a public event in 2017, forty-five years after my time in Munich, when I was given a European Film Award, a young woman introduced herself to me as his daughter. Hauke Stroszek had lately retired as a professor at a university in North Rhine-Westphalia. His last name was given by me to the main character in my screenplay *Signs of Fire*, which I went on to film in 1967 as *Signs of Life*. I later called my second film *Stroszek*, which I made in 1976 with Bruno S. (of whom more later). Also, when I was somewhat better known, I entered a literary competition sponsored by *Münchener Abendzeitung*, and for a bet, I submitted five separate short texts. There were prizes for the ten best entries, the writer had to be under twenty-five, and the texts had to begin with "A young person stood in the middle . . ."

Impersonating a clutch of young authors, I entered five pieces, among them a poem by a pseudonymous Wenzel Stroszek.

I received four congratulatory telegrams at my grandmother's address in Grosshesselohe; my fifth entry went unrewarded and so I lost my bet.

But there were some things in my studies that I found utterly absorbing. For a class on medieval history, I wrote a paper on the *Privilegium Maius*. This was a flagrant forgery from 1358 or 1359; in fact, it was a set of five clumsy mutually reinforcing forgeries, one supposedly going all the way back to Julius Caesar and Nero. This feigned title deed had to do with expanding the power of the rising Habsburgs, in this case, Rudolf IV, and the definition of their territory, which is almost identical with that of present-day Austria. The false documents led to the establishing of legally binding conditions and ultimately to the creation of the state of Austria. The falsification was already recognized by the Renaissance poet Petrarch, but in historical terms, it was crowned with success. It was an early instance of fake news, and I developed in my work a method that—not that I knew it—had never previously been used. Because my films to this day are preoccupied with questions of factuality, reality, and truth, in the sense of what I am pleased to call “ecstatic truth,” I offer no more than a short account of it here. I declared, even if it was illogical, that the “privilegium” was a true account and knocked props into the ground to view the documents from all possible perspectives while always using a contemporary argumentation of the time—power politics, social change, understanding of the law, balance of military power—and at the end, one could take out the props and one still had a supportable tissue of argument. In other words, the falsification, the fake news, turned in its structure to truth because history had anchored its changes there, as in an evolving truth.

What seemed to me a natural way of proceeding somehow got attention. Because I knew it would be hopeless to try to make a feature film right away, I accepted a scholarship to go to the United States—I barely had to apply for it. People were surprised that I wasn't a historian, but I was applying to a university that had cameras and a film studio to be able to

work practically and continue my development as a filmmaker. My early short films had been my only apprenticeship. I could have gone to a more prestigious university, but I chose Pittsburgh because I had the sentimental notion that if I went there I wouldn't be tied up with academic waffle because I'd be in a city with real down-to-earth working people. Pittsburgh was the steel city and I felt drawn to it because I had worked in a steel factory myself. At the same time, at twenty-one, in the space of a few weeks, I wrote my screenplay *Signs of Fire* and entered it for the Carl Mayer Prize, which was named for the author of such celebrated silent films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *The Last Laugh*. A few months later, by now just twenty-two, I was awarded the prize of five thousand deutsche marks, but because it hadn't been awarded the previous year, I was given ten thousand marks in 1964, the prize money for both years. With that, I would be able to make another short film right away. Every established and up-and-coming filmmaker had entered; I remember that Volker Schlöndorff was one of my competitors with his *Young Törless*. Later on, that became an important argument vis-à-vis the film-funding people who liked to turn me down but funded the projects of others. I was able to point to my screenplay being chosen ahead of all others, plus I had already made films, which was not the case with my rivals. Pittsburgh turned out to have been a bad idea; for a start, the steel industry was almost dead; it was in precipitous decline, and the shuttered plants were rusting away; and secondly Duquesne University, which had the film studio, turned out to be an intellectually impoverished place. I had no idea that there were differences among universities. Later, for other reasons, I came to love and respect the city.

People didn't fly in the early sixties, and I had won another competition for a free Atlantic crossing. I took passage on the *Bremen*, where a year before me, Siegfried and Roy had worked as stewards, diverting the passengers with magic tricks before going on to Las Vegas. It was on board this ship that I met my first wife, Martje. After we had reached the Irish Sea, it stormed for a week, and the dining room for eight hundred passengers was empty after two days. There was one round table where the tough customers had left their own allotted places for the company of their

fellows who were still walking. Martje was on her way to begin a literature degree in Wisconsin. The heavy seas didn't bother her. The view of the Statue of Liberty didn't interest us; we were engrossed in a game of shuffleboard on deck. Later, she concluded her studies in Freiburg, and we got married. She is the mother of my first son, Rudolph. He bears the names of three very important persons in my life: Rudolph, Amos, and Achmed. Rudolph after my grandfather—oddly, I always thought his name ended with a *ph* and it's only while taking a closer look for these memoirs that I saw it's actually Rudolf with an *f*. Amos after the American author, festival director, and film distributor Amos Vogel, who, like Lotte Eisner, was a mentor of mine. I remember his taking me aside after three years or so of marriage and asking me if everything was all right. Of course it was all right. "Why don't you have any children then?" he asked right out. I thought, *Well, indeed, why not?* So Amos, who fled from the Nazis under the grimmest imaginable circumstances from Vienna to the United States, was a sort of godfather. And Achmed after the last remaining worker of my grandparents'. My first time in Cos, when I was fifteen, I looked him up and introduced myself to him as the grandson of "Rodolfo." Achmed started to cry, then he threw open all the cupboards, drawers, doors, and windows, and told me, "All this is yours." He had a fourteen-year-old granddaughter as well and suggested that I might want to marry her. It wasn't easy to get him to drop the idea and gradually accept my cautious objections—I was too young; I couldn't feed a family—until I promised him I would name my firstborn son after Rudolf and him. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and in spite of ethnic cleansing, he managed to remain behind on the now-Greek island. Achmed worked as a guard in the archaeological digs at the Asclepieion on Cos, but every day he was put through a martyrdom. When he spread out his prayer rug, the children threw stones at him and yelled, "Achmed! Achmed!" But he said his prayers and endured it all. There is a sequence with him in my film *Signs of Life*. He lost his wife, his daughter, and even his granddaughter; all he had left at the time I next saw him when I was making preparations for the film was his dog, Bondchuk. But that day, Achmed again threw open all the

wardrobes and drawers and doors and windows, and instead of a greeting, all he said was: “Bondchuk apethane, Bondchuk apethane,” or Bondchuk is dead. His dog had died the previous day. We sat together crying for a long time and said nothing.

In Pittsburgh it soon became clear to me that I was in the wrong place, and after a week, I knew that I couldn’t stay. There was the film studio, true, but that was set up like a TV news studio, with a desk for the newscaster flanked by three maneuverable but extremely heavy electronic cameras. Old-fashioned spotlights were fixed to the ceiling and you couldn’t take them down or move them. But quitting school would have meant losing my visa status and therefore having to leave the United States right away. So I kept my registration but gave up my lodgings. There was a group of young writers clustered around a magazine at the university; I published my first short story there. In my memory, it all feels blurred, events piled on top of each other. Sometimes I would sleep on the library floor, but that had its downside because the cleaners would find me there at six in the morning. I switched among the sofas of various acquaintances and my original host, a professor, forty but terrified of his mother, who forbade him contact with female students and perhaps women in general. In front of the window at his place, there were dark trees and chipmunks, which have something consoling about them. Also consoling were the calls of unfamiliar birds and the play of sharp sunbeams cutting through the thin twigs. Images formed inside me. There were occasional bizarre scenes. I admitted to the mother of my host that a woman had visited him the night before, but I claimed that she had been with her fiancé, another student. The fiancé was my host’s invention. The mother fed her son as if he were a little kid—or, more precisely, she made him eat green Jell-O, and she started to think of me as someone who might also benefit from it. I ate it uncomplainingly. This motif surfaced many years later in my 2009 film called *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done*, where the protagonist, played by Michael Shannon, is covered in Jell-O by his mother as if it were war paint. He, playing the part of Orestes in a theater production, can no longer

keep performance and reality apart, and ends up killing his mother with a stage prop, a Turkish saber.

A freak chance changed everything. My temporary abode was in a place called Fox Chapel that was in the hills way outside of Pittsburgh. The bus would take me twelve miles or so, as far as Dorseyville, and from there, I would hike up the road through some woods. While I was walking this last stretch, I noticed I was several times passed by a woman in a car. Usually, all the seats were full of youngsters. On that day, it had started raining, and I wasn't dressed for it. The car drew up beside me, and the woman wound down her window; she could give me a lift; this wasn't hiking weather. It was a two-minute drive to Fox Chapel; that made a hundred and twenty seconds. Where was I from anyway? Germany, I was a "Kraut." My expression made everyone in the car crack up. Where was I staying? I explained my situation. Oh, said the woman, she knew the man, he was a weirdo, or worse, he was a wacko, a wacko-weirdo. Without hesitating, she said I'd do better staying with her; she had a spare room in her attic. Her place was just a quarter of a mile from his. So, from one minute to the next, I found myself adopted in this family as though I'd always been part of it. The name of the mother was Evelyn Franklin. She had six children between seventeen and twenty-seven, and she said a seventh would be good, seeing as her oldest daughter had just married and moved out. So there was a vacancy in the gang. The father had died an alcoholic, which must have meant years of misery for Evelyn. She only mentioned him briefly in passing, and always as Mr. Franklin. The youngest were twin girls, Jeannie and Joanie; then there was a brother, Billy, who was a failed rock musician; then two more brothers, one of whom—the only one!—was a bit boring and bougie, and then another, twenty-five, a little slow and with a soft heart, who some people considered mentally disabled. As a child, he had fallen out of a moving car and since then had been a little slow. Then there was a ninety-year-old grandmother and a cocker spaniel who went by Benjamin, as in Benjamin Franklin. I was put in the attic, where there was an old bed and otherwise just junk. It had a pitched roof, and it was only in the middle under the rooftree that I could stand upright.

I straightaway became part of the daily madness. Evelyn commuted into the city; she had a job as a secretary in an insurance company. The twins came back in the afternoon from high school in Fox Chapel, often with friends in tow. Long before that, though, from eight o'clock on, the grandmother would be trying to rouse Billy, who had usually been rocking in some bar until 3 a.m. She would go pounding on his locked door every half hour or so, trying to convert him from his sinful life, reading Bible quotes to him. The dog, who had a kind of symbiotic emotional relationship with Billy, lay forlornly outside the door. In the afternoon, Billy would emerge stark-naked, stretching pleasurable. The grandmother would flee and Billy would smite his chest and in Old Testament tones bewail his sinful life. Benjamin Franklin howled his accompaniment, but knowing what was coming next, he kicked up his back paws in the air. Billy switched into an imaginary canine language and started dragging Benjamin Franklin down the stairs by the back paws, a little like the way that Christopher Robin hauled Winnie-the-Pooh downstairs after him. At each carpeted landing, he stopped to resume lamenting his sinful scrapes in dog language. Down in the living room, the twins and their squealing girlfriends fled the naked youth, who now set off in pursuit of his runaway grandmother. Billy now proclaimed his jeremiads in a mixture of Old Testament prophet and cocker spaniel.

It was by no means unusual in this atmosphere of chaotic creativity for the twins to set off after me, squirting me with Woolworth's eau de cologne. They were full of ideas. One day I spotted them plotting an ambush for me behind the door that led down to the garage, and I crept into the top-floor bathroom intending to jump all the way down and, coming through the garage, attack them from behind. My own preferred weapon was shaving foam. It had been snowing, but there was only an inch or so of loose snow, which I thought was enough padding for my leap. I landed on the spiral concrete staircase that led down into the garage. My ankle made a penetrating sound that I can hear to this day; it was like a wet branch snapping when you step on it. The fracture was so complicated that I was

operated on and encased in a plaster cast up to my hip. After a month of that, I was given a walking cast, which only went up to my knee.

I loved the Franklins. With them, I got to know some of the deepest and best things about America. Later on, I invited them to Munich and took them to Sachrang for a village party. Hugs, beer, squeals, and whoops. I took them up the Geigelstein. Contact got harder in later years because the entire family, Billy included, went over to fundamentalism. When I did see them, I could hardly recognize them, they'd all put on so much weight. When I was playing the villain in a 2012 Hollywood action film—it was *Jack Reacher*, and the director, Christopher McQuarrie, and the star, Tom Cruise, both wanted me—the filming was in Pittsburgh. But I couldn't find the Franklins anymore; they were scattered to the four winds. I drove out to Fox Chapel. Almost everything in the area had changed; there were new buildings everywhere; it was very depressing. The house on Oak Spring Drive was almost unchanged; the lawn had the same old broad-leaved trees; but the path down to the garage was grown over with flowering shrubs. There was no one home. I tried several of the neighbors, found an elderly couple, and learned that the house had changed owners several times. I knew that Evelyn Franklin had died. A year later, I heard that Billy had died too; he had been like another brother to me. We had recognized our kinship almost instantly.

The twins and their girlfriends were wild with excitement because a new British band was playing the Civic Arena. They were called the Rolling Stones. So far, all these groups and pop culture as a whole had passed me by. The one exception was Elvis, whose first film I had seen in Munich, and the kids all around me started quietly and methodically taking the place apart. I remember the police being called. Now in Pittsburgh the twins took a piece of cardboard to the concert with the name of their favorite, Brian, on it. He was their front man at the time; not long after, he was found drowned in his swimming pool. I still remember my astonishment at the commotion and the girls' screams. When the concert was over, I saw that many of the plastic bucket seats were steaming. A lot of the girls had pissed themselves. When I saw that, I knew this was going to be big. Much later, in

*Fitzcarraldo*, Mick Jagger played the second lead alongside Jason Robards, but then Robards got sick and the filming had to be suspended halfway through. Everything would have to be done over, this time with Klaus Kinski. Mick Jagger was so peculiar, so unique, that I didn't want to recast his part, so I wrote it out of the script altogether. I only had him on contract for three more weeks anyway, because the Stones had a world tour coming up and the dates were all fixed. He was to play Wilbur in my film, an English actor who had lost his mind and turned up in the Amazon. The origin of the character, at least in part, was the stark-naked Billy Franklin in Pittsburgh. The part of the dog, Benjamin Franklin, was taken by a timid ape called McNamara.

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## NASA, MEXICO

got a job with a producer working for WQED in Pittsburgh. His name was Matt, short for Matthias, von Brauchitsch, a relative of the former field marshal and commander in chief of the German army, who in 1941 fell into disfavor with Hitler. I kept quiet about the fact that I didn't have a work permit. Von Brauchitsch had several documentaries on the go for NASA about futuristic alternatives to rocket fuel. I had neither training nor any references, but he seemed to be convinced of my capacity. That sort of pragmatic optimism is something I admire about the United States to this day. The film I was to make for him was about early theoretical research on plasma rockets, which was happening principally in Cleveland, Ohio. Put simply, superheated plasma was to be used as fuel, but the temperatures would have melted any sort of solid container, so the experimenting was concentrated on nonmaterial vessels formed from extremely powerful magnetic fields. In Cleveland there was at the time the most powerful magnet in existence. Right next to it was an experimental atomic reactor. I remember corridors with open doors and mathematicians working in empty rooms. Once I watched a group of young men doing nothing, just thinking. Finally, one of them got up and drew a dot on a green chalkboard, then an arrow pointing at it. Then silence. I got to be friendly with the head of the institute that had several hundred people working for it. He was twenty-six. I had bought a rusty VW, which Grandma Franklin called the Bush Wagon. She could never get my name right either. She would call me either Wiener or Urban or Orphan. The twins affectionately called me the orphaned kid. In

my rattletrap “Bush Wagon,” I drove to Cleveland from Pittsburgh several times a week. One bizarre incident stuck in my mind. In one hangar there was a great vacuum chamber built out of extremely tough steel, and it was so big that several technicians could go inside it to prepare an experiment. The vacuum was so powerful, it would vaporize a man. The door to the chamber was operated electrically and moved very slowly on rails. The engineers prepared objects inside the chambers, and then left. The door closed silently and shrill alarms sounded to indicate that the testing was about to begin. Then all at once, there was shouting from the chamber and desperate hammering against the steel walls. One of the technicians who hadn’t noticed that the chamber was being sealed was left behind. Nor did he know that his hammering could be heard very clearly. It took minutes for the door to open again very slowly. The man inside was deathly pale with shock. No one knew what to do. A very young man, very big and strong and calm, the only Black man among the twenty scientists present, walked up and gripped the man by the neck and just held on to him like that. He held on to him for a while, then the shocked man laughed, and all those present started laughing as well. The near mishap resulted in the hall being closed down on the spot and the incident being investigated. More comprehensive security procedures were introduced as a consequence, and this led to additional security clearance for everyone present, which in turn led to my leaving the project and the end of my time in the States.

My involvement with this film project was later subject to elaborate misrepresentations. I had been making films for NASA. I had worked as a scientist for NASA. I had given up my career as a scientist and potential astronaut in favor of a film career. All these inventions sound well and good, and they don’t bother me. They don’t bother me because I know who I am. Or, rather, there are areas where memory forms itself, becomes autonomous, acquires new guises, spreads over the sleepwalker like a gentle veil. In my 2016 film about the internet, *Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World*, I put the same question to a number of scientists, a question that I call my Clausewitz question. A theoretician of warfare, Carl von Clausewitz posits the famous conclusion in his 1832 book *On War* that

war may sometimes dream of itself. As a sort of echo of that, I ask, Does the internet sometimes dream of itself? In the meantime, several readers of Clausewitz have come forward: he had never made such a statement nor is there any trace of it in his letters. I ask myself now: Did I misunderstand something as I was reading it or did I actually invent this quote myself a very long time ago and keep saying it back to myself until I took it for fact?

Ten days after the incident in the vacuum chamber, I received a summons from the immigration authorities. I was to present myself immediately and bring my passport. I knew what that meant. Because I had violated the conditions of my visa, I was about to be deported not just over the nearest border but all the way to Germany. In Pittsburgh, I quickly bought a Spanish dictionary and drove off. The parting from the Franklins was painful, but we knew we would see one another again somewhere. I drove almost nonstop to Texas and crossed the border at Laredo. In the no-man's-land on the bridge over the Rio Grande, something ground in my VW engine, as though the United States didn't want to let me go and Mexico wasn't quite ready to take me in. I pushed the car into Mexico to be repaired. Two days later, I drove on and surrendered myself to whatever would happen. First, I stopped in Guanajuato, because I could work for the *charreadas* there, but that came to an end after a few weekends when something unusual happened. Unlike in American rodeos, where bull and rider are released from a narrow pen together, the bull in Mexico is first brought to ground by three charros with lassos. Then a rope is wound around his chest, and at the moment you have got hold of it, the bull is freed. He leaps up and explodes into motion, and in the space of two seconds that feel as though you're in a car turning over in a high-speed crash, a rider of my ability is thrown off. It always hurt, but the public loved the idiot from Alemania. My last bull, or rather my last bullock, because I only ever tackled bullocks, leapt up like the others, and then something unexpected happened: he stopped still and turned to look at me. To the delight of the onlookers, I spurred him on and called: "*Atrevete, vaca!*" "Don't be a coward, cow!" The beast set off and cunningly made for the stone walls of the arena. My bad leg was pinned between the bull and the

wall. I had taken the precaution of splinting my shin and ankle between a couple of wooden school rulers, but that was the end of our fun and games.

I needed another source of income. I started importing stereos and TV sets across the border for a few well-off rancheros I had met at the *charreadas*. Those things were much more expensive in Mexico because of the duty. I was able to do that because there was a gap in the border from Reynosa to McAllen. Day laborers crossed into McAllen in the morning and went home at night to Mexico. Three lanes of the widened highway were set aside for them, and their cars were identified by stickers on the windshields. Mexicans were given such stickers only after security checks by the US authorities. I managed to get hold of some Mexican plates and one of the stickers. My beat-up old car looked the part. Early in the morning, I was simply waved through on the special lanes with a few thousand other cars by the US Border Patrol. It sounds incredible now, but back in 1965 there was very little in the way of drug smuggling and the gang wars hadn't started. Anyone who wanted to get into the US illegally swam across the Rio Grande and made it to the other side as a *mojado*. The only thing I worried about was getting into McAllen without the Border Patrol looking at the visa in my passport. On the way back, the Mexicans just waved you in anyway. In a few instances, I brought Colt revolvers into Mexico, which were basically ornamental weapons with mother-of-pearl inlaid handles. The wealthy rancheros liked to show off with them. The barrels had to be long as well, that was important, a macho man couldn't have a little thing dangling off him. I recently saw a letter of mine to Lucki where I describe a pistol that had such a long barrel that I carried the grip high up in my armpit and taped the barrel, which reached down to my waistband, to my rib cage so tightly that I could only take small breaths. I did that because it seemed safer. You could always find a firearm in a car, but the Mexican customs guards never patted you down if you were a gringo unless they caught you on the run. But this little line of business came to an end too. One ranchero asked for a sterling-silver Colt and a silver bullet to go with it, and that kind of item didn't exist in McAllen; that had to be special-ordered. Furthermore, I had to foot the cost in advance

myself. I spent everything I had and took the chance. Then the ranchero lost interest in the revolver because I didn't have any silver bullets. The weapon was all well and good, but there were no such things as silver bullets; they would have disintegrated in the barrel and could have caused it to explode. It was another three weeks before the man, almost out of pity, finally agreed to buy the Colt off me. For a while, I felt what poor peons and vaqueros feel every day of their lives.

I moved inland to San Miguel de Allende, a beautiful little colonial town now completely spoiled. Around the time I was there, the first wave of artists had begun to settle there, who over the decades were to draw vast numbers of confused and prosperous Americans after them, all wanting to get in touch with their creativity. I find it hard to set foot there now. But on my trips from there, I discovered the mummies of Guanajuato, which at the time were stood in long rows against a wall. My film *Nosferatu*, which I made twelve years later, begins with a long sequence of those mummies, all with their mouths open as if to scream. By the time I went back there to film, the mummies were all in a museum in long glass cases. Secretly at night, we were able to liberate them from their glass coffins and prop them against a wall. I'll never forget how light they were, like paper, because all the liquids had been drained out of them. It's not a matter of symbolism, the beginning of that film, or maybe only slightly. I had seen the mummies, and they were part of me.

All this time, I'd been pursuing my film project *Signs of Life*. Back in Munich, my mother was endlessly posting applications to film grant committees and sending out copies of my early films for viewing. I knew I would have to go home sooner or later. Then, in the very south of Mexico, on the Guatemalan border, I got sick. It was hepatitis, but I didn't know that. I wasn't given a visa for Guatemala, but I was obsessed with the vague idea that I would help form an independent Mayan state in Petén. Word of this endeavor had reached me. I still remember the asphalt road through the jungle where many snakes had been run over, and the clear streams and the big boulders where women were washing clothes. The frontier was the river near Talisman. I wanted to cross into Guatemala if only briefly. A few

hundred yards upstream of the border post, I found a likely spot. For a flotation device I stuffed an old inflatable soccer ball inside a shopping net and swam out cautiously with my few belongings on my head. Something told me there was something wrong. I trod water for a while, and then I noticed a couple of very youthful soldiers carrying rifles and looking irresolute. They had stepped out of the jungle and were grinning sheepishly. I waved to greet them and very slowly swam back.

Secretly, I was relieved that I hadn't managed to cross the border. It also was becoming clear to me that I wasn't well. I felt wretched and feverish. I made my way back up to Texas almost without stopping, this time without fake plates and a windshield sticker. There weren't yet any electronic data, and I assumed I'd be able to get back into the country on my exchange student's visa. What had I been doing in Mexico? I claimed to have been on a short research trip and was allowed back in. From then on, everything is a fevered blur. I drove and drove, day and night, stopping briefly every so often to lay my sopping head on the passenger seat for a few hours' sleep. I remember a village on a Native American reservation in Cherokee, North Carolina. I stopped for gas and ate a hamburger served to me by a Native American woman. Her dress looked like the kind of thing you might see at a carnival. Did I want to see the dancing chickens just across the way? Everything was dancing as it was, my plate, my parked car, the tip I'd left on the bar. Oh, yes, I wanted to see those chickens before dancing north in my old Bush Wagon. Years later, I went back there, and the dancing chickens in my film *Stroszek* from 1976 are presumably the craziest thing I've ever shown on screen. When I look at the closing sequence of the film now, I can see those chickens as through the hallucinations of my drive. I made it to Pittsburgh. The Franklins delivered me to a hospital right away. After a couple of weeks there, they came to pick me up, the lot of them. After two more days, I flew back to Germany.

## PURA VIDA

I accept that I can no longer jump off my right foot. It was a silly thing that happened when I leapt down out of the window, but in Mexico, one of the men in the arena, a great master of the lasso, assured me that this was part of life, this was *pura vida*. Euklides was his name. He shook me by the hand the first time I was thrown and bleeding out of my mouth because I'd almost bitten my tongue off when I hit the deck. His hand felt like a vise. What he meant wasn't the purity of life, as with the early saints, but the sheer, brute, unpredictable, overwhelming presence of life. In memory of him, I later gave his name to a crippled twelve-year-old who runs a guesthouse in my 1987 film *Cobra Verde* and who is the only person not to be afraid of the bandit of that name, played by Klaus Kinski. The boy has a speech defect; stammering but proud, he gives his name: Euclides Alves da Silva Pernambucano Wanderley.

Because my jumping foot is my left anyway, I was able to go on playing soccer in Germany. My brother Till introduced me to Munich Black-Yellow, and I played either in goal or center forward. The other members of the team were taxi drivers, bakers, office workers, and I loved them all. Black-Yellow didn't play in any of the official leagues, but we might have held our own in the fifth. My brother was a better goalie than I was. When he was fourteen, he caught the eye of a talent scout from 1860 Munich, which was the dominant local team before the rise of Bayern Munich, but my mother talked him out of a career as a professional sportsman. Black-Yellow was started by a pastry chef by the name of Sepp Mosmeir. I never

met such a charismatic man. Sepp radiated unconditional warmth; he loved opera, and he had astonishing leadership qualities. We would do anything for him. But there was a shadow over him as well. When he was growing up in South Tyrol, he and his friends had clambered up an electrical pole by a railway line, and one of his friends had grabbed hold of the power line. The boy shook and shook for minutes on end and smoke started to pour out of him. Sepp described the sound it made when the boy's charred body finally hit the ground. It made the sound of a sack of briquettes hitting the gravel ballast under the rails. Sepp's wife, "Mrs. Moss," died after long torments of cancer, and he suffered the same fate. I saw him shortly before he died. He left a gap in my life.

I moved from goalie to outfield player. At the Cannes Film Festival, I think it was 1973 when *Aguirre* was shown in the directors' section called Quinzaine des Réalisateurs—the official festival had rejected the film—there was a game of actors against directors, and I was in goal. Most of the directors were unfit, and a few were so fat they could barely run, whereas the actors were generally in pretty good shape. Actually, we were hopelessly outclassed, but I kept out everything that came my way. Thereupon the actors changed their tactics. They allowed the directors to advance into their half, and then they would hit long balls over the top to where two or three of them would turn up in front of my goal unopposed. One of them was Maximilian Schell, who had once played on a Swiss national amateur eleven. I saw him chase down a long pass all by himself. Way outside the penalty area, I got to the ball first and lashed it away a split second before he got there, and then Schell smashed into me. He could have taken evasive action, but even in a friendly like this one, he was pretty intense. I saw stars. My elbow was dislocated and bent forward instead of back. It was another year before I felt over it. Schell and I bonded over this collision, and in his Oscar-nominated film called *The Pedestrian*, I have a little walk-on part.

From then on, I always played center forward even though most of the Black-Yellow team was faster or technically more gifted. But I had a quicker apprehension of movements in space and always had an instinctive

nose for goal. That often drew the opposing defenders to me, which created space for my teammates. I could read situations, and those were the kind of players who always impressed me most, someone like the 1980s Italian defender Franco Baresi, who could intuit the collective intentions of the opposing forward line; no one matched the depth of his understanding of the game. As a forward, the Bayern Munich player Thomas Müller is the same species; he seems able to ghost into the area unopposed; he identified space like no one else, and no one seemed able to track his movements. In the way he could read a landscape, my grandfather was not dissimilar. Sepp Mosmeir played defense, and his dream of one day scoring a goal was never fulfilled. In the course of his farewell match, we were awarded a penalty. The whole team insisted he take it. Sepp Mosmeir scored. We led him from the field in tears. The referee had to suspend the game for several minutes.

I had my share of the usual soccer injuries, a cruciate ligament, for instance, and once, when I was still goalie, in a game against the Bavarian butchers' guild, lots of hearty butchers' apprentices went at us as if we were so many calves, and one of their strikers rammed me under the chin. I had caught the ball and was lying on the ground. When I came around, I didn't want to leave the field and tried to tell the referee that I shouldn't have been carded; it was the other fellow who had committed the foul, not me. The referee was shouting, but I couldn't hear because of the buzzing in my head. Finally, he plucked at my shirt and pointed to the blood on it, which had to have been mine; I did at least understand that much. I had fourteen stitches put in my chin, but I didn't have health insurance at the time and needed to keep the costs down, so I had them stitch me up just like that. In a similar way, I had a tooth pulled without the customary painkilling injection. To put it down to masochism on my part I think would be a mistake. I didn't love pain; it was just something that was there in my frame of reference—the way I expected the world to be.

When we were kids in Wüstenrot, we fought a battle once with freshly hulled chestnuts, and I climbed up on the roof of a barn to be in a safe place from where I could see where the other kids were all hiding. I was sitting

astride the gable when I heard my name called. I turned in the direction of the voice, and at that moment, a missile hit me in the eye. A lightning bolt went through me, and I remember sliding down the steep roof on my front. I plunged headfirst into a pile of agricultural machinery way below me; I can still see the iron rods and blades. My forearm broke, both bones. The doctor in Wüstenrot didn't set the break properly. A week later, after agonizing pain, the cast was taken off and the whole thing reset.

My worst time, though, was a skiing fall near Avoriaz around Mont Blanc. I had been invited to show a film at the festival there and had borrowed a set of skis. I was interested in a breathlessly steep slope on which some athletes were making the foolish attempt to break the speed record on skis, which at that time stood at 220 kmh. For those speeds, the racers wore long aerodynamic helmets that went all the way down to their tailbones and a kind of spoiler on their calves. After my group had gone on, I stayed behind and studied the slope. Finally, I went down about two-thirds of it. The feeling was exhilarating. A mild rise on the other side helped slow you down at the bottom. That evening I talked about what I'd done, and people laughed because I thought I'd gone at probably 140 kmh. A couple of days later, we were back in the vicinity of the steep slope, and I said, "All right, I'll prove it to you here and now." Unfortunately, this was pure showing off on my part. This time I set off a few meters higher up. At such speeds, even a small unevenness on the surface has the effect of a shock to the suspension of a racing car; sometimes you're an inch over the snow for twenty or thirty yards. I can remember two things: on my skis I flew past my brother Lucki and an Israeli producer, Arnon Milchan, both tall men, at eye level; and at that moment, I knew I was too high. I can see landing on the slope in slow motion; one of my skis shot away like a spear. To this day, Lucki is unable to describe what he saw. But evidently my ski boot stuck fast in the snow and I went over headfirst. I must have been thrown many yards up in the air on the steep slope, and it was about a hundred yards farther on that I came to a stop. The most immediate danger was that I might choke on my vomit. When I came around, I saw blood and vomit in the snow and heard someone groaning softly. It was me groaning. Two

vertebrae were damaged in my neck, and my collarbone had become detached from my breastbone. Even though it was soft new snow, it had abraded my face, and one eye was hurt. I relate it in this much detail because I'm ashamed of the accident and because I am somehow also a product of my mistakes and misjudgments.

But then I was also fortunate in the same measure. In Urs Odermatt's film *Bride of the Orient* years later, I played the villain; it must have been in 1987. In one scene, the foul monster I was playing flees from a desolate farm into the valley in his open jeep. There was a very narrow bridge over a gorge with a mountain stream. I drove pretty fast, but Odermatt the director said it didn't look like anything much and asked if I couldn't do it a bit faster. I put my foot down so hard on the next take that the jeep skidded on the sand edging the narrow forest road and crashed through the iron bridge rails. Miraculously, one of the iron rods ran through the engine and stopped the car dead in its tracks, and it merely bent down a little as though to tip me out like a load of rubbish. I have no idea how I managed to keep hold of the steering wheel. Admittedly, I struck the steering wheel with my side, which gave me a renal colic. A shocked Walter Saxon, who was in charge of the production, drove me to the nearest doctor. The Polaroid photos I have of the scene look unreal, hard to make sense of. A curious insect, which has mysteriously attacked a metal barrier. Far down are some very large polished rocks gleaming in the streambed.

I had another bit of luck during the last days of the preparations for *Aguirre*. Under intense time pressure, we had shifted the entire production to Cuzco in the highlands so as to begin shooting at the start of 1972 in the Urubamba Valley and in Machu Picchu. We had long delays and lots of trouble getting the costumes, helmets, and suits of armor for the conquistadors to the place. I had to keep shuttling from Lima to Cuzco and back. I always took the local airline, LANSA, because it was by far the cheapest. In our financial straits, there was really no other possibility. LANSA, though, had a notorious safety record. One of its only four planes had crashed; another was just scrap and pillaged for parts. In the end, the company was down to just one plane because its only other machine had

flown into the side of the mountain next to Cuzco in 1970, and everyone on board was killed. Soon various irregularities came to light: the plane had a total load of 96 passengers and crew, but 106 bodies were found at the site. Airline employees had clearly sold an extra ten standing places. Then it turned out that while the captain could sort of fly, he didn't have a valid pilot's license, and I think it also emerged that the ground mechanics who did the maintenance were used to nothing bigger than mopeds. So there was one plane left that handled the internal flights, Lima to Cuzco and back, then Lima to Pucallpa to Iquitos and back, which was the jungle route. The airline had been stripped of its license to fly, but strangely enough, after a couple of months, it was back in business—with its one surviving plane. Martje, my wife, was there, helping on *Aguirre* and accompanying some of the actors from Lima to Cuzco. She was booked on the flight three days before Christmas, the last one before the approaching disaster. I had managed to get a ticket for the day after Martje flew for the flight that left early in the morning of December 23. It's not easy to remember the events in their right order. Many travelers had besieged the airport to try and get back to their families for the holidays. I drove to the airport, but the plane wasn't at the gate. Hours later, it was announced to us that there was some maintenance issue and that we should be patient; it would be ready soon. Then in the evening we were told that the plane was unable to fly that day, that we should present ourselves early on the morning of Christmas Eve. I was duly back at 6 a.m. The number of passengers had once more swelled with everyone from the previous day's flight and those booked for that day, the twenty-fourth. The plane was still undergoing repairs. In the crush, I managed to slip an airline employee a twenty-dollar bill, so I and a small bunch of my people would be put on the flight. But the plane still didn't show. I had a bad feeling from time to time. At long last, the plane came trundling up; it was almost midday, but to my disappointment, there was an announcement that as it was so late in the day it would be possible to execute only one flight, which would be the one into the jungle. The flight to Cuzco and the highlands was unfortunately canceled. I can still hear the cheers of the passengers who were booked to Pucallpa and Iquitos.

Thirty minutes later, the plane disappeared off the radar. The subsequent search for it went on for days. It ended up being one of the biggest searches ever undertaken in Latin America. Even an American woman astronaut who happened to be in Peru at the time joined in. People presumed the plane had crashed on the jungled slopes on the far side of the Andes, but there was no sign of anything there except clouds, storms, and rain. After ten days, the search was abandoned. On the twelfth day after the disappearance, a seventeen-year-old girl turned up, the only survivor, one Juliane Koepcke. She had been with her mother on the way to visit her father in the jungle. After the war, he had crossed the Alps on foot to get to Italy to find a ship to South America, where, as a biologist, he wanted to set up an ecological field station. The principles of ecology were still completely unknown at the time. He wasn't able to find a ship in Italy, so he carried on walking and got to Spain, where he stowed away in a cargo of salt on a ship to Brazil. After he arrived, he crossed almost the entire continent on foot and got to the Peruvian jungle in a dugout canoe. He finally set up his experimental station, and Juliane later grew up there. That was where she was going on Christmas Eve Day 1971 in a miniskirt and flimsy shoes; the evening before, she had celebrated her high school graduation in the capital. The plane fell apart in a violent storm at an altitude of fifteen thousand feet. She sailed down on her row of three seats with no plane. Later on, she said that she hadn't left the plane, the plane had left her. For a few weeks, she was a sensation all over the world, and then she completely disappeared from view to avoid the journalists disguised as priests or cleaning women who were sneaking into her hospital room in Pucallpa; it must have been terrible for her, having just lost her mother. The story of her incredible luck and her odyssey through the jungle caught deep inside me, not least because I had come so close to catastrophe myself. Twenty-six years later, I went looking for her and made a film with her on the very site of the crash; it was called *Wings of Hope* (2000). Her story is the extraordinary witness of a woman with more strength than I have ever seen in a man. Early in 1972, we filmed some of the early scenes of *Aguirre* on the three successive rapids of the

Huallaga River, not realizing we were only a few streams away from the blundering path that Juliane, half dead, was taking through the jungle.

The crash left no traces in the jungle. Rather, fragments of the plane had come down over an area of fifteen square kilometers. That's why it hadn't been possible to see a crash site. From Juliane's reports after her rescue by forest workers, it proved possible to reconstruct her eleven-day march and to find the area where the plane had come down. The first teams found broken suitcases and Christmas wreaths and presents hanging in the trees, a macabre, surreal setting for dangling human intestines.

In 1998 I sent two expeditions into the jungle to the area around the Pachitea River, but they came back empty-handed. Then I found one of the three forest workers who had rescued Juliane. He remembered the area well and set off alone to find the place. Going up the little Shebonya River, he trod on a stingray that was hiding under sand and shallow water, and its tail sliced through several layers of rubber on the heel of his boot. These rays are terribly poisonous; they are more lethal than most snakes. He lay for two days on a sandbank dying when, by chance, a canoe came by. The paddlers initially didn't want to take him because he didn't have any money to pay them. Finally, he gave them his rifle as payment, and they lifted him into their canoe. In this way, he was saved. I found the canoeists and bought the rifle off them. Juliane gives it to him in the film as her present on seeing her rescuing angel for the first time in many years. It was also he who led the fourth expedition to seek out the area of the crash. The wreckage hadn't been carried away, only the bodies and body parts had been collected. On this last expedition, I went with my younger son, Simon, then eight years old. We had five *macheteros* ahead of us to clear a path through the jungle. We were well-equipped, but my son, to whom I then grew extremely close, fell ill; even so, we marched on for five more days. For two days, he was carried on the back of one of the *macheteros*. It was Simon who spotted the first fragment, an instrument panel from the cockpit, which I still have.

Later, my assistant Herb Golder had himself lowered on a steel cable to the spot; there were several woodsmen with him who cut down a few trees so we could land a helicopter. That spot became the camp for the shoot. My

friend Herb Golder was my assistant on several films. In my film *Invincible*, he plays a very convincing rabbi. I had tested dozens of actors, and the only one who could play the scene with conviction and intelligence was Herb. Later, we cowrote a story he had been researching for many years, *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done*, released in 2009. In his day job, Herb is a classics professor at Boston University. I have no one I can have such detailed arguments about antiquity with. But Herb isn't all about book learning. He's built like an oak and has black belts in various martial arts. When he opens his mouth, idle extras stop lounging around and prick up their ears. I ended up making the film in 2008 with Michael Shannon, the most gifted actor of his generation. Today he is a star. Before *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done*, he had played only small parts, and here I entrusted the lead to him. David Lynch was involved in the production, but it was more his producer, Eric Bassett, who did the work. At that time, David Lynch was barely interested in films anymore. He had withdrawn completely into Transcendental Meditation.

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## DANCE ON THE WIRE

Many things in my life look to me like a high-wire act, even though most of the time I don't even notice there are abysses to either side of me. It's no coincidence that I am friends with Philippe Petit, who became famous when, shortly before the opening of the World Trade Center in New York, he ran a wire between the Twin Towers and danced his way across in giddy height. He had sought me out and found me when *Signs of Life* was shown at a film festival in New York City. At that point, his walk at the Twin Towers had been in planning for a long time. Just before our meeting, he had pulled off a secret coup at the deepest gorge in Europe in Savoy. One night he spanned a wire across the abyss, and at first light, he set himself to cross it; it was only by chance that he was spotted by a farmer who was driving his herd to pasture over a bridge. The farmer let his cows go, ran back to the village, and woke the policeman. By the time the two of them had reached the scene of the crime, there was nothing left to see. Philippe was gone. His assistants had quickly taken down the wire; only a few iron posts knocked deep into the ground were left to show where it had been. With the Twin Towers, he had with false papers inveigled himself into a team of welders years before and even founded a building firm to get a foothold in one of the unfinished towers. He gradually assembled a storehouse in his office for the steel wire and the various other bits and pieces he needed. From one of the flat roofs, he then shot an arrow with a fishing line attached onto the twin building. Assistants took up the line and attached a thin steel wire to it, to which, with more

back-and-forth, a fine cable was attached. Finally, his heavy steel rope weighing several tons was pulled over onto the other building where Philippe had secretly soldered a heavy hook under some molding. At six in the morning, he went out on the rope. He was undisturbed, no one saw him, no one watched him until 410 meters beneath him a taxi driver happened to look up. A traffic jam developed that stretched many blocks northward. Police stormed both roofs, but they couldn't get Philippe off his rope. Finally, he lay down flat on it to sleep, so to speak, because a police helicopter was whipping up the air dangerously.

Sometime after that in Paris, deep in the night, Philippe levered up a manhole cover and led me into his secret realm of subterranean tunnels and chambers. In one great chamber, there were thousands of skeletons in tidy stacks; in another, skulls from the time of the Black Death. Another night we set off with sixty yards of climbing rope and a hook; Philippe wanted to examine the roof of the Gothic church of St. Eustache in Les Halles, but we were interrupted by a famous singer and actor who was on his drunken way home, and we gave up our plan. When I opened the 1991 Viennale festival in Vienna, I had Philippe walk across between the antiaircraft gun tower and the tower of the Apollo cinema.

I may not have seen the chasms beside the way, but quite involuntarily, as though pursued by a curse, I seemed to draw misfortune as I worked on my films. In my very first feature film, *Signs of Life*, everything was fully prepared, the contracts drawn up, the costumes on location, when the Greek military staged their coup. Then suddenly rail connections were broken; flights didn't fly; no one knew what had happened. I was unable to get in touch with anyone, so I drove from Munich to Athens practically nonstop. The border was still open. The ministry in charge of film permissions was closed; there were soldiers sleeping in the corridors. Through our Greek production director, I was told that all existing permissions had been revoked, and I could see for myself that while the junta was interested in all sorts of things it was not interested in foreign film productions. I took a chance and started shooting just a few days later than planned. But I was expressly forbidden to clear the harbor of the island of Cos of people or to

bombard the promenade with fireworks. I did it anyway. The place was crawling with soldiers, but I was never arrested.

That was just the beginning of our problems. My lead, Peter Brogle, had been a tightrope walker in a circus before becoming an actor. He suggested that he might do some tightrope walking in the citadel even though it wasn't in the script, and I thought that was an interesting idea, a way to show the delicate balance of the character. Every tightrope walker fixes his own rope, and while Brogle was busy doing that, at no more than six feet off the ground, a stone broke away, and he fell from a low parapet, breaking the bone in his heel. That's really the most delicate part of the human foot, involved in all the dynamics of walking. Two weeks before the scheduled end of the shoot, we had to break off. My actor spent six months in the hospital and rehab until we could take up the work again. And even after that, Brogle needed a complicated piece of gear attached to his hip to be able to walk. We could only film him from the waist up, and we still hadn't shot the scene on Crete with all the windmills. Then Thomas Mauch had a simple but brilliant idea: he filmed the boots and legs of an extra scaling the stony terrain, and for the continuation of his strides, we had Brogle standing by. As the camera pans upward, it briefly leaves the legs and catches the upper body and face of the character and follows him to the edge of the terrain behind which several thousand windmills are waiting.

The following films were all similarly afflicted. Right at the beginning of our journey to the Sahara, before we had even crossed into Africa, the cameraman Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein got his finger caught in some machinery, and the bone shattered into fragments that had to be strung on a steel wire. Then we were put in prison in Cameroon; why, I still don't understand. We were on our way from there to the interior of the Rwenzori Mountains on the border of Congo and Uganda, but my cameraman and I both got so sick in the Central African Republic that we couldn't move. We had to interrupt the shoot in Bangui and collect further material for it during the next two films. In *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, the fates smiled upon us, and we had nothing but good luck. That film is about a rebellion in an institution where the inmates smash everything to smithereens. All the

objects were normal size for us, but because the actors were small, such a thing as a motorbike or a double bed appears monstrous. One of the lilliputians in the film was run over by the driverless car but sprang to his feet immediately and continued hurling plates at it. Another actor was engulfed in flames in the scene where the lilliputians in their lust for destruction pour petrol on the potted plants and set them on fire. I threw myself on top of him and managed to quench the flames; he had just a little burn on one ear. An insignificant detail from the shoot was much later got hold of by the media and blown up out of all proportion: I was said to have leapt into a cactus. Correct, I did. Because, when the man was on fire, I made a promise to the cast: "If you all get through this in one piece, I'm going to leap into a cactus field, and you can take pictures of it." The field in question was right behind the main building. It was easier jumping into it off a ramp than getting out of it because the cacti were tall and closely packed and had long nasty spines, some of which spent the winter in the sinews in front of my knees.

I made a not dissimilar promise to my friend Errol Morris. I ate my shoes in front of an audience in a cinema in Berkeley, California, when Errol's first film, *Gates of Heaven*, was released in 1978. Apart from me, no one had taken Errol particularly seriously because he had never completed anything. For instance, although musically extremely gifted, he had put his cello away in a corner from one day to the next; he had his doctoral thesis practically finished but never got around to submitting it; he had gathered thousands of pages of material on serial killers but never wrote the book. When he wanted to start his first film, he complained to me about the trouble he had raising money for it. I replied that his was the kind of project you could start with just a roll of film, everything else would fall into place by and by. The project was so substantial, I argued, that money was bound to follow it, like a street dog moseying along with its tail between its legs. But this time he had to finish what he'd begun. I promised him that the day his film was released in theaters I would eat my shoes, whatever pair I happened to be wearing at the moment. This anecdote also found its way into even the briefest of my biographies even though what mattered much

more was that the film was extremely good. Roger Ebert included it in his list of ten best films ever made for the *Sight and Sound* poll; *Aguirre*, by the way, is also included.

Most things with Errol were up and down anyway. He had spent months in a godforsaken hole called Plainfield in Wisconsin while pursuing his research on serial killers. Plainfield was where the most notorious of all American murderers, Ed Gein, had operated. Hitchcock's *Psycho* was inspired by him. Aside from his murders, in the course of which he would gut his victims as if they were deer and use their skin for lampshades and armchair covers, Gein had the habit of secretly excavating recently buried corpses. Errol noticed that the opened graves formed a ring, at whose center was the grave of Gein's mother. Had Ed Gein also excavated his mother? We spent a long time going back and forth on this question. The only way of getting a conclusive answer was for Errol to dig her up secretly himself. If the body of his mother was still there, he had not; if it was missing, he had. I offered to help him. In a few months, I would be on my way from New York to Alaska to film, and halfway to the Canadian frontier, I arranged a rendezvous with Errol on such and such a date. I arrived in Plainfield with shovels and pickaxes, but Errol had lost his nerve. He had disappeared. My vain wait in Plainfield at least had one benefit. The car was having gearbox trouble, but there wasn't a mechanic in Plainfield. A few miles away, there was a junkyard with a mechanic who scavenged cars for parts. I was thrilled by the premises and their owner, and a year later I was back there and persuaded the mechanic to play one of the principal characters in my film *Stroszek*. The junkyard and the grim flatness all around it was perfect for showing what happened to the American dream. Errol, who had never actually planned on filming in Wisconsin, was initially angry with me for having stolen his landscape. But I was a thief without loot. Then, because he liked the film so much, he made things up with me. We don't see each other often, but we have a special kind of appreciation of each other.

Fate saved its hardest blows for *Fitzcarraldo*. Whenever I'm on particularly challenging shoots, I always have Luther's 1545 translation of

the Bible in a facsimile reprint with me. I draw comfort from the Book of Job and the Psalms. I also have Livy's account of the Second Punic War from 218 to 201 BC, beginning with Hannibal's departure from North Africa and his crossing the Alps with elephants, an enterprise of spectacular daring. After devastating defeats at Lake Trasimene and Cannae, Rome was facing destruction. In that almost hopeless position, Quintus Fabius Maximus was put in command and saved Rome and thereby probably also the West as we know it, which otherwise might have been Phoenician instead of Roman. His recipe was permanent retreat, always hesitating to give battle. Because that would have spelled the end. Fabius Maximus fought a war of quiet, implacable attrition. It got him the disdainful nickname of Cunctator, the delayer, the cowardly hesitator, and history has yet to do him full justice. Because Fabius Maximus knew exactly what he was doing even if it got him the contempt of the armchair warriors. Only Hannibal understood that Fabius was his doom. When a large contingent of reinforcements under his brother Hasdrubal was destroyed, Hannibal said: "I know the fate of Carthage." Fabius Maximus is the greatest of my heroes, just ahead of Siegel Hans. And just after Siegel Hans comes Hannibal.

The preparations for *Fitzcarraldo* went on for more than three years in all. Originally, 20th Century Fox wanted to make the film. Jack Nicholson was impressed by my films and wanted to play the lead, but it soon became clear that he and 20th Century Fox intended to have the film shot in San Diego in the botanical gardens with a plastic scale model for the ship. It was the early eighties, we didn't yet have the current digital box of tricks. Also, Nicholson only took parts that left him free to watch Los Angeles Lakers' games. He took me to one in Denver in his private jet and tried to convince me that the San Diego solution was the simplest. In hindsight, I am a little surprised by the number of actors who were considered; another was Warren Oates, who would certainly have been interesting—cast against type—as *Fitzcarraldo*. He had a squishy "proletarian" face and had become known as the star of *The Wild Bunch* and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*. There were ships to build, jungle camps to set up, but at a big meeting of all the parties plus lawyers, the representatives of 20th Century

Fox were very cordial to me and called me by my first name. Then the suggestion was made that for safety's sake the film be made in a "good jungle," i.e., the botanical gardens. I asked politely what they thought a bad jungle was, and the atmosphere instantly froze. From that moment on, I was Mr. Herzog, and I knew I was on my own.

Later, I was asked many times why I hadn't shot the film near the Peruvian jungle hub of Iquitos, with its hotels and airport, i.e., at a more convenient jungle location. But the terrain around Iquitos is so flat for the nearest three thousand kilometers that the height differential to the Atlantic is about one hundred meters. What we were looking for, on the other hand, was a place with two parallel Amazon tributaries with a narrow mountainous divide between them. But this seemed not to exist anywhere. The rivers in the jungle do flow in parallel often enough, but they are twenty-five miles apart, and the mountains are far too high. Finally, at the confluence of the Río Marañón and the Río Cenepa, we found an oxbow bend on the Cenepa that came close to the Marañón. There was a barrier that was only one hundred meters high. We would hoist the ship—which had yet to be built—from the Cenepa into the Marañón. A little downriver, the Marañón runs into the Santiago. The united rivers then burst through a line of mountains. The water course narrows in a gorge and creates the notorious rapids of Pongo de Manseriche, which at high water can be extremely dangerous. I kept a diary at the time, which I published years later as *Conquest of the Useless*. Here is a brief excerpt:

*Saramiriza, 9 July 1979*

*A parrot at my feet is devouring a candle, holding it with the toes of one foot. A hen and her chicks came into the store, a wooden shack with a corrugated tin roof, where we were having some food fixed for us, and attacked the almost naked parrot, tearing one of its last arse feathers out and pecking several times at its sore bald arse. Afterward the hen wiped her beak clean on the ground. We are all still shaken from the terrifying impression of the rapids, and are behaving with*

*almost mathematical punctilio toward one another. At the military outpost of Teniente Pinglo, none of the soldiers knew how high the water level was. They merely pointed out that a few days ago a boat with eleven men on board had disappeared without a trace. But the men had drunk too much aguardiente, sugarcane brandy, beforehand, and had not sailed into the gorge until nightfall.*

*After considerable reflection, we concluded that it had to be doable, because the Río Marañón was very shallow; the night before, the level had sunk by a good two meters, and in the morning we had found our boats so high and dry that we could hardly drag them into the water. What did not bode well was the Río Santiago. There must have been terrible downpours along its upper reaches to the north, and where the river joined the Marañón, it was alarmingly high. Before the first rapids, which formed an isolated prelude to the Pongo de Manseriche, a blast of bitingly cold air struck us, coming from the narrow passage between the mountains; here it would still have been possible to turn back. With the cold came a distant rumbling from the chasm, and no one understood why we sailed on, but sail on we did. Suddenly, we were facing a wall of raging water into which we crashed like a projectile. We received a blow so powerful that the boat went spinning into the air, the propeller howling in the void. For a moment, we hit the water vertically, and I saw like an apparition a second wall of water towering in front of us, which struck us even harder, twirling the boat into the air again, this time in the opposite direction. Before we entered the rapids, I had already secured the anchor chain so firmly that it could not fly overboard and get tangled in the screw, and the gas tank was fastened in place with iron clamps, but suddenly the battery, as big as a truck's, went hurtling through the air. Or rather, for a moment it hovered in the air on its straining cables directly in front of my face, and my head collided with it. At first it felt as though my nose were broken at the root, and I was bleeding from my mouth. I wrestled the battery down so that it didn't fly off anywhere else. Then came moments when there was nothing but waves all around and above us, but it was more the*

*rumbling that I recall. Then I recall that we were through the rapids, drifting backward. On the steep jungle slopes to either side, monkeys screeched.*

*In Borja at the lower end of the Pongo, they did not want to believe their eyes, because no one had survived the passage when the water level was sixteen feet above normal, and our level had been eighteen. The village Pongeros clustered around us, not saying a word. One of them inspected my swollen face and said, “Su madre.” Then he let me have a swig of his aguardiente.*

We had struck a deal with the nearby village of Wawaim. But there were political tensions between two rival camps of Aguaruna communities, and one of the groups, thirty kilometers downriver, took advantage of our presence to boost their profile. There was also a controversial oil pipeline across the Andes to the Pacific and a sudden dramatic increase in the military presence along its length. No one knew why, but we then found ourselves in the middle of a border war between Peru and Ecuador, where the line ran not far north of our camp in the Cordillera del Cónedor. Given these circumstances, I withdrew the entire team from the camp, leaving behind only a medical station to treat the local population. The camp was occupied by Aguarunas, who took advantage of the confusion and burned it down. They had invited reporters to witness it. I was away in Iquitos and received crackly, barely comprehensible radio communications from the camp. I recorded everything on a tape machine to be able to work out in peace what was going on. But I understood that it meant, for now, the end of the production.

It got worse. The Peruvian and soon the international media accused me of having ravaged the fields of the locals during the filming, of having had some of the Aguarana people imprisoned, of having violated their human rights, and various other nonsense. There was a public tribunal against me in Germany, and all that seemed to cast a shadow over the film. At that time, Volker Schlöndorff was the only person to fully back me up. I remember a press conference at the Filmfest Hamburg in front of avid

journalists, where I was presenting documents that unambiguously confirmed my position, when suddenly Schlöndorff made his way to the front. His face was purple; I thought he had had a seizure. But he yelled at the journalists so loudly that I wondered where this slightly built man got such a thunderous voice from. Among all the directors of the New German Cinema, he is the only one with whom I have a personal friendship. Amnesty International later confirmed that in a small jungle town, Santa María de Nieva, long before the shooting got underway, four Aguarunas were taken in by the police for something or other, but that had nothing to do with us at all; they were accused by some local bar owners and shopkeepers of not having paid outstanding bills. But, of course, none of that made it into the press; it wasn't "sexy." The Aguarunas were portrayed as an almost pristine people living in paradisal harmony with nature when, in fact, they went around in Ray-Bans and John Travolta T-shirts. They had speedboats, used radios, and employed media consultants. I just had to forget about all that and set about building another camp two thousand kilometers away. Between the Río Urubamba and the Río Camisea, I found another suitable ridge between two rivers half a mile apart.

Every imaginable catastrophe, not just film catastrophes but actual catastrophes, befell me. When my lead, Jason Robards, got so sick halfway into the shoot that we had to fly him back to the States, that was only a "film catastrophe." Then his doctors refused to release him back into the jungle. We had to reshoot, this time with Kinski in the lead and my brother Lucki somehow holding the disintegrating production together. He called all the financial backers and insurers to a meeting in Munich and gave it to them straight. He then presented his rescue plan. He saved the production. I was asked if I still had the strength to reshoot the film. I said that if this film failed all my dreams would be at an end, and I didn't want to live as a man without dreams.

Our calamities were perfectly concrete and palpable. We suffered two plane crashes, each of them single-engine Cessnas, one with stores, the other with several Indigenous extras on board. The latter crash was caused by a twig flying up and getting caught in the elevator at the tail of the

machine, causing it to loop the loop. Everyone in it was hurt, and one person was left paraplegic. That weighs on my heart to this day. We later set him up in a general store we built for him in his village to provide him with an income. One of our woodsmen was bitten by a snake, a *shushupe*, the most poisonous of all. He knew that his heart and lungs would be lamed within sixty seconds and that the camp with our doctor and the serum was twenty minutes away, so he picked up his chain saw and cut off his foot. He survived. Three of our local workers who had gone upstream on the Camisea to fish were ambushed by Amahuaca people in the dead of night. The Amahuacas were a seminomadic tribe based in mountain country ten days upriver. They had violently refused any contact with our civilization, but because we had been experiencing the driest dry season in living memory, they had followed the drying river course downstream, presumably hunting for turtle eggs. They shot our men with arrows almost six feet long and struck a man in the throat with a foot-long razor-sharp bamboo point. The young woman lying at his side was awoken by the gurgling sound, thought a jaguar had her husband by the throat, and grabbed a still-glowing branch out of the fire. At that moment, she was struck by three arrows that were probably also aimed at her throat. One drove into her stomach and broke off against her pelvis, and one just brushed the edge of her hip bone. The third member of the party had a shotgun, which he fired blindly into the dark. The attackers fled. The next morning, the unhurt man brought the two wounded parties back to our camp, and we decided to operate on them there and then because they would certainly have died if we had attempted to move them. Our doctor and the excellently trained local helper operated on the kitchen table, and I helped, holding a powerful pocket lamp to light up the stomach cavity of the woman. In my other hand, I held a can of insect repellent, with which I held at bay great clouds of mosquitoes drawn by the smell of blood. Both patients pulled through. The man who had arrived with the arrow through his neck and lodged in his shoulder could speak only in whispers after he was healed. Les Blank filmed him after the operation. He appears briefly in *Burden of Dreams*.

Just two days later, we filmed the unmanned ship—one of the two identical twins—being hurled through the rapids of the Pongo de Mainique. It bounced off the rocks on either side with such force that I saw the lens flying out of the camera. I tried to hold on to Thomas Mauch, the cameraman, but we went flying after the lens, and he struck the deck, the heavy camera still in his hand. The force of the collision split the webbing between his two last fingers deep into the palm of his hand. He too was stitched up by our gifted Indigenous assistant paramedic, who was extraordinarily deft with dislocations and stitching up wounds, and had once put Mauch's dislocated shoulder back, but because all the anesthetics had been used up in the hourlong operations on the arrow victims and couldn't be replaced for some time, Mauch suffered great pains. I held him in my arms, but that didn't help much. Finally, I called in one of the two working girls we had employed, Carmen, who squeezed his head between her breasts and talked to him softly. She did it lovingly, magnanimously, and heroically. It may sound like a strange thing for a film production, but even the Dominican priest from the missionary station at Timpia, fifty kilometers downriver, had insisted that we have prostitutes in our company because otherwise, with the number of male woodcutters and canoeists, there was every risk of attacks on the local populations.

These sorts of events seemed to happen again and again. We had to get through the most violent rainy season in sixty-five years, which obviously affected the work and the resupplying of the camp by tiny planes landing on tiny mud airstrips; Walter Sixer personally took huge risks upon himself. One must realize that we were hundreds of kilometers from the next decent-size town, Pucallpa or Iquitos. Every nail, every bar of soap, every can of petrol, and almost every food item had to be brought here. The rivers swelled up to outrageous heights and carried away bushes and tree limbs and sometimes whole islands of great trunks. You couldn't run a motorboat in them, and you couldn't land a seaplane on them. Then the water level sank so drastically that we couldn't get the ship back off the hillside into the Urubamba, where the average water level was eight meters but was now suddenly fifty centimeters. We could start up the work only six months

later. This was exacerbated by confusions in my personal life and a deep feeling of isolation because, when we couldn't move the ship up the hill for weeks, almost everyone privately gave up on the project. Being alone has never bothered me, but being alone in a crowd of people who had given up on me and doubted my sanity was difficult. One of the very few who didn't lose faith was Lucki. My diary entries in my ever-shrinking script seemed to become undecipherable and microscopic, then ceased for almost a year in the jungle, the year of tribulations. But I was always prepared at any moment to confront anyone and everyone, whatever work and life threw my way.

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## MENHIRS AND THE VANISHING AREA PARADOX

My film *Fitzcarraldo* has a twofold origin—even if there is one man who helped build the jungle camps who likes to claim that he told me all the details of the life of the rubber baron over long nights. The particulars of the film are all mine. The same worker also claims he belonged to a Peruvian liberation group that had contact with Che Guevara in Bolivia. Success, they say, has many fathers. One of the key experiences was a chance occurrence while I was looking for a windblown coast as a setting for a dream sequence in *Kaspar Hauser* in 1974, eight years prior. Among the candidates were the Lofoten and the northern coast of Norway, but because that was so far, I started to drive along the coast of Brittany. One evening, with darkness already setting in, I stopped in a parking lot in Carnac and saw something amazing in my headlights. Like armies climbing out of the void, there were Neolithic stones lined up in long rows, uphill and down, thousands of them. For a long time in the darkness, I felt my way along the rows of menhirs, then crawled off to sleep in the car. My startlement was like the feeling I had had seeing the windmills in Crete. The next morning, I walked between the parallel ranks of chiseled blocks. There must be thousands of standing stones in and around Carnac, the heaviest of them weighing well over one hundred tons. At the kiosk where they sell tickets, I bought a guide, where I read the foolish claim that the transportation of these stones would have been impossible for men thousands of years ago, and therefore they could have

been put there only by extraterrestrial visitors from some other galaxy. Cross about this, I decided I wouldn't leave this place until I'd found a solution to the conundrum of how blocks of stone could be moved from some distance, then set up on end—as though I were a prehistoric man with this problem.

That same day, I came up with an idea of what I would do using only the available technology of prehistoric times: shovels, ropes, stone axes, animal grease for a lubricant, fire. For simplicity's sake, I put the question to myself this way: I assumed I had a gigantic stone already hewn among the numerous rocks on this coast and I needed to transport it, again for simplicity's sake, half a mile on the flat and to set it up somewhere. With the help of a thousand disciplined men, I could do it in a year. The main task would be to build a firm ramp half a mile long that would be close to level. Even if there was only a half percent incline, the ramp would be five meters high by the end. At that end, I would scrape together a small hill and dig a large crater into it. The enormous stone would be tunneled under crosswise at the beginning of the transportation process, and the tunnels would have round fire-hardened oak logs pushed into them. When the rest of the earth was removed, the block would be sitting on rollers. To get it to move would then be simple—it would be on wheels, as it were. At the end, the menhir would topple into the crater hole of the earthen hill, and after that, one would only have to shovel the earth of the hill away, leaving a little at its base for stability.

It would be harder on sloping ground, as here in Carnac. But here too the same principle of a fixed ramp and a crater would apply, only it would take a little more strength to move the stone uphill. For that, I would use a turnstile mechanism, winding a rope from a fixed trunk or pole as a way of applying energy to distance; I would get the large cross to turn and wind the rope on a kind of spindle. A plurality of such turnstiles should suffice to haul at least one hundred tons up a hill. That was the principle one could see at work in *Fitzcarraldo*. Groups of Machiguengas push against the long arms of the turnstiles, and on the ground, a hawser is wound around a post.

Many years later, when I was directing *The Magic Flute* in 1999 in Catania, I had Maurizio Balò, a wonderful set designer whom I used in many productions, create a set in the background where enslaved Egyptians can be seen erecting an obelisk. The libretto to *The Magic Flute* is set in a fantasy pharaonic Egypt, and I wanted a visual acknowledgment of the circumstance. The erecting of the obelisk is done in my production by means of rollers and turnstiles. Then a few years ago, I happened to see a series of engravings of the erection of the obelisk in St. Peter's Square in Rome in 1586. I was astounded. There I saw a ramp and many, many turnstiles, the difference being that they were moved by horsepower and that pulleys and hoists were used for the great number of ropes. So fascinated was I by this discovery that I was given access to the Vatican library to view the files on the erecting of the obelisk. I talked and talked the responsible archbishop out of his wits until he gave way. The files contain detailed lists of the equipment used, horses and laborers, accidents and illnesses; and the best of all were the various proposals submitted at the time by technicians and architects for the putting up of the obelisk. The solution involving turnstiles won the contest and the obelisk may be admired to this day. To the amusement of anyone listening, I sometimes apply reverse chronology and claim that the idea was stolen from me. In *Fitzcarraldo*, admittedly, the majority of the power came not from local Indigenous peoples nor from horses but from our caterpillar, which had previously planed down the angle from sixty to forty degrees.

My theory that in prehistoric times they must have used the method of the hollow hill for siting a menhir seems to be borne out by the great menhir at Locmariaquer in Brittany. This stone is by some way the largest of its kind. Stood on end, it must have been more than twenty meters tall and have weighed at least 330 tons. It was presumably hoisted up in the fifth or sixth millennium BCE. Today it is in four pieces on the ground, but to me it seems impossible that it broke on the ground because its biggest and heaviest piece is lying in one direction and the other three are some distance away, pointing somewhere else. Speculation about it is vague and contradictory. My conjecture is as follows: when the stone was dropped in

the crater hole of the man-made hill, the top third broke off from the sheer weight of the impact, presumably against the lip of the crater, which will have had the effect of a calculated breaking point. Perhaps there were preexisting cracks in the stone. When a cat leaps out of a third-floor window, it remains unhurt; an elephant in a zoo can be deterred from running away by a concrete ditch three feet deep because the animal would break its bulky leg bones because of the inertia of its colossal mass. So the top of the stone splintered against the angle of the hill in three parts, all pointing in one direction. My guess is that in those far-off times our ancestors dug away the hill from the thickest part of the rock because that was so much bigger than any other known standing stone. It is possible that that part stood for thousands of years then fell in a different direction due to erosion. That might explain the angle of the parts on the ground and the distance of the individual pieces. People have suggested an earthquake, which is hard to imagine in Brittany and has not been confirmed for any time we know. One entry in a ship's log in 1659 describes taking the standing stone as a point of reference, and the mighty lower part could still have been upright then. I pursue the progress of the research with curiosity, ready at any time to revise my ideas.

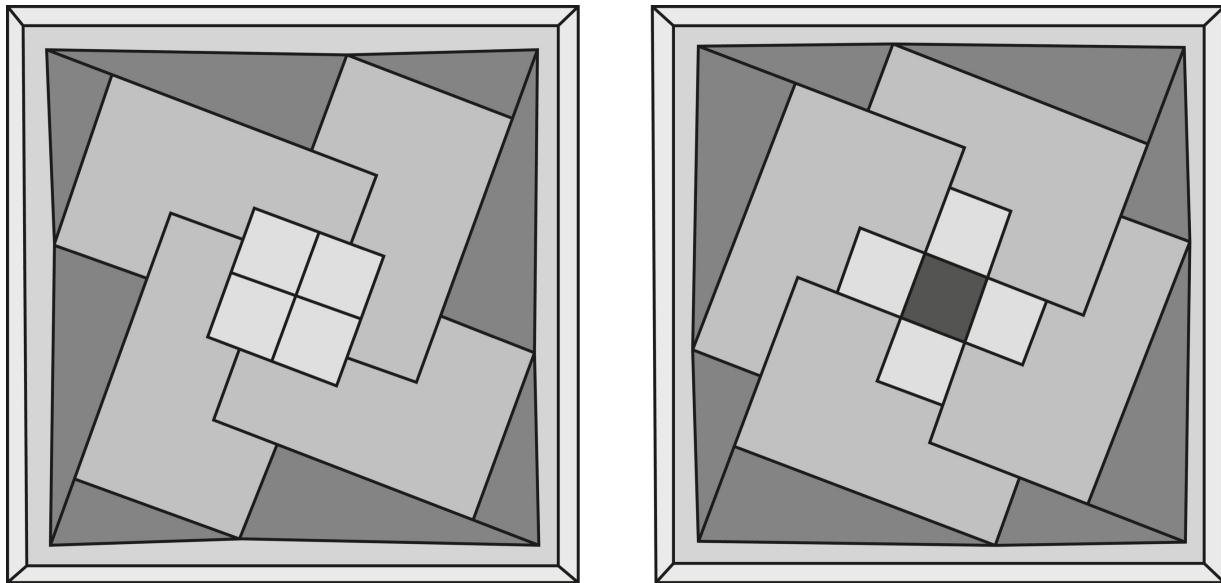
The story of *Fitzcarraldo* was brought to my attention by Joe Koechlin. He came to see me in Munich and urged me to return to Peru; everyone was waiting and hoping that, after *Aguirre*, I would make another jungle film. He had a very exciting story line for me concerning the rubber baron Carlos Fermin Fitzcarrald, who toward the end of the nineteenth century was the wealthiest businessman in the entire region. This Fitzcarrald had employed more than three thousand woodworkers and a small army of overseers. When he died in a canoeing accident, he had just turned thirty-five. To me, it didn't sound like material for a film; it was just the story of a notorious exploiter, and Joe and I sat together a while longer. As he left, Joe pulled the door shut after him, then popped his head in and said that there was one detail he had forgotten. Fitzcarrald had once moved a steamship across a flat land bridge from one river to another. In the middle of the jungle, engineers had broken up the ship, which weighed some thirty tons, into

dozens of parts and carried them across to a parallel river where they were reassembled. I got Joe to sit down again. In my head, everything began to cohere: fever dreams in the jungle, a three-hundred-ton steamship carried over a mountain, turnstiles manned by Indigenous peoples to wind it up as it was done in the Stone Age, the voice of Caruso, grand opera in the jungle. When soon after I disembarked from an airplane in the steam heat of Iquitos, there were vultures circling overhead and pigs wallowing in mud right next to the landing strip—one of them was rotting; it had been struck by a plane—I involuntarily recoiled. Good god, not another film like that! But the project, just like all the others, blew me away. I had no choice. I say that because it is often assumed that I must be obsessional. No, I'm not. Nor is it true that I had got enough money together to embark on another film. In fact, I risked all the money I had in the world to get the thing off the ground. After a very short time, I was so reduced that I was living in a converted chicken coop with a papier-mâché ceiling just a little higher than the top of my head. Rats scuffed around at night. Finally, I was left with no food. But I always made sure I had excellent shampoo and the finest soaps because it helps one's self-esteem in the jungle if you bathe in a river and smell good afterward. In the Indigenous market in Iquitos, I swapped my shampoo and soap for three kilos of rice, which I proceeded to live on for the next three weeks. I accepted necessities and not much else, and saw it as my duty to follow a grand vision.

I never trusted textbooks at school. If you think about the history of physics, the repeated attempts to explain the universe would make you dizzy. For two thousand years, it was accepted, following Aristotle, that air weighed nothing. Aristotle weighed an empty pig's bladder, then the same pig's bladder fully inflated. They weighed the same. It was only when one included the understanding of buoyancy that things appeared differently. That applies in many ways. We continually receive new dietary advice, with one trend following on the heels of the last. Much of what they say about cholesterol is no doubt correct but not its utter demonization; without cholesterol, we would be dead in short order. In the United States, the top line on every plastic water bottle always says: "Total fat—0" and the same

with cooking salt: no fat, zero, as though that means something. When my star Christian Bale systematically and under medical supervision lost sixty-five pounds over six months to be able to play Dieter Dengler, who was found half starved after his flight from North Vietnamese captivity, I set myself out of solidarity to lose half of what Bale was losing. I was repeatedly asked how I did it, what diet I had followed; and Americans in particular thought that it was an incredibly radical, positively sensational prescription: I just ate half of what I normally would eat. What was so difficult in the case of Christian Bale, though, was the fact that we had to film the story in reverse because simply by eating a lot after the first day of a shoot it's relatively easy to put the lost weight back on again in the space of five weeks. To play deepening despair backward is something that takes an actor of really extraordinary quality to do.

I don't like to accept anything as a given. This is how I view the so-called vanishing area paradox. In my dentist's waiting room in LA, I one day leafed through a *Scientific American*, which is a serious and much-respected periodical. On one of its pages was a graphic showing a paradox defying all logic and experience. Sixteen individual parts make a pattern that, if you assemble the same pieces in a different order, suddenly leaves a blank in the center of the same plane. Because my name was called at that instant, I tore out the page. I wanted to resolve the paradox myself without help.



How can something unimaginable be possible? I have never closed my mind to that question. For instance, I follow with keen interest the way that in the world of quantum physics a particle that has the choice between passing through window A of a grid or window B may, in certain circumstances, pass through both windows at the same time. Perhaps I should add that I don't claim to understand this physics. But I receive regular invitations from the community of particle physicists who admire my films as much as rock musicians, skateboarders, and various other enthusiastic denominations do. I have spoken with mathematicians who are interested in the fantastic element of my landscapes just as I am interested in their application of algebra to unthinkable spaces and planes. In my 2020 film, *Fireball*, there is a sequence of quasiperiodic crystals, tiny traces of which were found in fragments of a meteorite that came down in Siberia not far from the Bering Strait. Crystals follow rigid symmetries; this has been understood for two centuries or more; anything else is unthinkable and not allowed. But in the seventies, the British mathematician Roger Penrose evolved a sort of geometry that proved the unimaginable. The most astonishing thing remains that in 1453 some Persian craftsmen created an arrangement of tiles on the outside wall of a shrine in Isfahan that is quasiperiodic without knowing the mathematics at the root of such a

pattern. I have met Penrose and have since acquired even more respect for the unimaginable. But I was intrigued that *Scientific American* should describe the paradox of the vanishing area as insoluble. After all, Aristotle hadn't been challenged for two thousand years purely because he was Aristotle.

After long pondering the conundrum, I left geometrical thinking. I tackled the paradox in another way because it resisted all my real-world experience. I simply asked myself the question: Is this even a paradox at all? And then I finally took a closer look at the two depictions. Why were there two frames when one would have been sufficient? Wherever the edges of the steplike forms touched the frame, the inner area in one or other of the two figures was almost unnoticeably convex and concave in the other. The paradox wasn't a paradox—it was just a hoax. The total of the slight enlargements and slight diminishments in the area was exactly the size of the small rectangle in the second graphic. It took me two months to get there; others could have done it in minutes. The sort of time you might wait for your dentist, say.

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## THE BALLAD OF THE LITTLE SOLDIER

**F**itzcarraldo was a rough, wild time, with scenes, music, and interludes that I was processing long after the shooting was over. In the early eighties, I was left licking my wounds for a long time. That was the time too that I met the mountaineer Reinhold Messner. In pretty short order, we decided to make a film on his plan to climb two eight-thousand-meter peaks in the Karakorams in Pakistan—not just climb them but climb over them. As a rule, you take one way up a mountain and the same way back, but as long ago as 1970, on his first eight-thousand-meter peak, Nanga Parbat, Messner had “climbed over” it. That was when his younger brother had died. The crossing was a product of necessity, an almost hopeless situation on the summit, with oncoming storms making a descent via the route he had come up impossible. Messner climbed down the far side of the mountain under atrocious conditions, and his brother perished in an icefall. Messner himself lost several toes to frostbite and very nearly lost his life as well. But he was an extremely considered and methodical man; I liked that about him. It was not infrequent for him on climbs, with a peak already almost within reach, to turn back coldly because the danger of an avalanche on the final section seemed too great. He did exactly what was humanly doable. To lift a ship over a mountain wasn’t a gamble either; it was my recognizing that this was doable. In our joint enterprise, Messner planned to go at two adjacent eight-thousand-meter peaks called Gasherbrum I and Gasherbrum II with a second mountaineer by the name of Hans Kammerlander. And in 1984 the two duly

did ascend Gasherbrum I one way and descend by another, which brought them to the foot of Gasherbrum II. This too they climbed up and over, and we were waiting for them in their base camp. The achievement was extraordinary. Like almost everything else Messner did, it was pathbreaking. I don't question that he is the most important mountaineer not just of our time but of all time. Messner's professionalism and the human warmth of Kammerlander made for a wonderful character combination in the film. *The Dark Glow of the Mountains* was completed in 1985. But what I actually had had in mind was a feature film to be shot on K2 on the way to the Gasherbrums. For the last fifty miles, you follow the great stream of the Baltoro Glacier into which a glacier flows from K2. I dreamed of K2 because it's so solitary and spectacular, a little like the Matterhorn in the Swiss Alps except that this second highest mountain in the world is the most dangerous bar none. In our base camp at the foot of the Gasherbrum peaks, we once experienced a fourteen-minute avalanche. I followed it on my wristwatch; I couldn't believe this avalanche that wouldn't stop. Finally, I saw snow and ice descending on us simultaneously in such masses that it looked like a mushroom cloud coming horizontally directly at us. Our base camp on the glacier had been built fully a mile from the mountain's flank for security, but within seconds, everything had been pressed flat by a storm of powdered ice. It took days for us to dig out and fix our film equipment. Incidentally, my wristwatch blew up in my face the following day as I was drinking a cup of tea. The air pressure under the watch face was too great.

When the two mountaineers set off with their headlamps into the black night and were just tiny disappearing specks the next day, lost from sight, the filming stopped. A few days later, a Spanish expedition that had their camp next to ours invited me to climb up Gasherbrum a ways with them because they had failed to reach the peak and now needed to dismantle their upper camp. They hooked me onto their rope and we climbed the dramatic broken glacier cataract that constitutes an immediate obstacle—as though giants had thrown a cup of dice. Because these cubes of ice the size of houses are in such constant movement, the Spaniards had put out aluminum poles with flags in the zigzag of the ice for orientation. We quickly got from

5,000 meters to 6,500. Then I realized I had the unmistakable signs of incipient altitude sickness. One sign was that I sat myself down in the snow while the Spaniards took apart their camp, and I finally, feeling increasingly apathetic, lay down on my back. At that moment, I understood that I had to lose altitude. The Spaniards took my word for it and let me go. It should never ever have been allowed to happen. I set off by myself; visibility was good. There is, though, the unconditional rule that at least one other man has to be with you for safety on the rope. Reaching the upper limit of the ice break, I decided I would go around it instead. The snow there wasn't too steep, and I took giant steps downhill. I didn't know there were crevasses up to a hundred meters deep that even professional mountaineers couldn't be counted on to spot. There is nothing to distinguish them from the ordinary snow cover. At a jog, I stepped through a thin crust into the void, but I had so much momentum that my upper body reached the other side, and I was able to pull myself up. The crack was no more than a couple of yards across. Something similar befell Kammerlander at the end of their great climb, but he was roped to Messner on a vine cord. To save weight, the two men weren't carrying regular mountaineering rope, but the cord was enough to stop Kammerlander's fall as he dangled into the void. In my case, the Spanish were sheepish about their remissness afterward. I was reunited with them when they later threw the collected metal poles from the ice field into a crack in the glacier. The bundle of frail aluminum poles burst asunder with a light metallic cry when they first struck ice, and the farther they clattered down into the ice, the deeper was the sound they made. It was like a great chorus of screams. At the end, when the poles were about a hundred meters down, the tone had morphed into a surge of innumerable echoing organs. I already had a story line for my film on K2, a type of science fiction idea about a radar station on an almost inaccessible peak, but with my own experiences on Gasherbrum, that project was swatted aside because I always listened to the voice counseling prudence.

At about the same time, a new person turned up in my life, Denis Reichle. He was driven by the conviction that we needed to make something together; what exactly that was would become clear in time.

Reichle, who had grown up an orphan in Alsace, was drafted as a child soldier in the final battle for Berlin as a fourteen-year-old. Almost all the boys in his unit perished; he survived. Alsace became French, and the French army recruited him and packed him off to Indochina when he was barely eighteen. He survived years of dirty jungle warfare. When he returned to France as a veteran of two wars, he became a photographer in the fashion industry; he also tried out as a racing cyclist. The hollow world of fashion soon revolted him, and he became a photojournalist. He worked in war zones all over the world and contributed numerous reportages—almost always on the side of the oppressed minorities. Afghanistan, Angola, Lebanon. He survived five months of Khmer Rouge captivity in Cambodia. He was the only Western journalist to report from the bloody liberation war in East Timor. Because there were no regular air or ship communications there, he had himself ferried just offshore by a fishing vessel and swam the last mile. I have never met anyone who understood so much about war nor anyone who proceeded so methodically for months from commander to commander until he could be sure he could risk himself in a contested area and entrust himself to a troop of fighters. After the end of *Fitzcarraldo* in the eighties, the underground army called Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path, became even stronger in Peru. Beginning in the uplands of Ayacucho, their terror campaign was an enigma where leadership structure and ideology were concerned; it was practically impossible to penetrate from outside. They practiced massacres on the rural populace, to which the Peruvian army responded with massacres of their own. Denis made some initial contacts and slowly, over five months, worked his way cautiously toward the upper ranks of the guerrilla organization. We thought about collaborating on a film about them. There came an invitation to meet a more senior commander. Other reporters had also been invited, but Denis called me to say that he had checked the thing out with his contacts and it looked dodgy. I asked him what we should do, and he said, “Not this.” The meeting took place without us, and all eight reporters fell into a trap. Not one survived; they were all beheaded.

I found myself in Australia in 1983, preparing for my film *Where the Green Ants Dream*. The subject this time was a conflict between a group of Aboriginal people protecting one of their sacred places against the bulldozers of a mining company; it is also about the last speakers of a dying language and about complex mythologies. It was clear to me that starting out from my own culture I would never be able to penetrate the thought of the Aboriginal people and their concept of dreamtime, so I invented my own myth of green ants, which is related in the film. The elders of Yirrkala in the Northern Territory preferred that to my dabbling in their mythology. I had great help from a couple of Australian directors, Phil Noyce and Paul Cox, who even put me up for some of the time. I play a minor part in Cox's *Man of Flowers*. The documentary filmmaker and cameraman Michael Edols knew a lot of Aboriginal people and helped me make valuable connections. I had gotten to know Michael and some of his films back in Cannes in 1976 and asked him to do a cameo role in *Nosferatu*. Walter Sacher and the costume designers Gisela Storch and Anja Schmidt-Zäringen, a loyal and clever long-term collaborator of mine, are in the same scene where they invite Isabelle Adjani to a feast in the open. At their feet is a milling mob of thousands of rats.

When Denis Reichle asked me to direct a film for him on child soldiers in Nicaragua, I had to turn him down because I was too deeply involved in my new work in the Australian Outback. My problem in those months, among others, was that I wanted to film four hundred thousand ants stopping dead and mysteriously waving their antennae. I wanted them all facing the same way, like so many iron filings in a powerful magnetic field. I worked with cryobiologists, but all our experiments were useless. In the end, I had to cut the scene, and the ants didn't appear; they were only talked about. What isn't doable I won't do.

I suggested Michael Edols to Denis, and he started working with him in the dual role of director and cameraman, shooting in a military training camp in Honduras. But because the two had completely different approaches to the project, they soon parted ways. Denis called me, pretty upset, and asked if I couldn't jump in and rescue his film, and I somehow

made it across to Honduras to the guerrilla training camp. Most of the soldiers were children belonging to the Miskito people; the youngest of them were between eight and eleven. Months after our shoot, most of them were dead because they were always in the front line of the fighting. They had the reputation of being fearless. Denis was exceptionally thoughtful. After crossing the Río Coco, the river that marked the border with Nicaragua, there were mortar rounds landing close to our encampment. The commanding officer wanted to run away, though it was certain that our position was not known to the other side. We stayed put because that was Denis's advice. The following day, there was supposed to be an attack on a Sandinista camp put on especially for the camera, but Denis and I were not in favor of any fight scenes that were purely for show. He coldly met with the commander, who was a vain son of a bitch, and asked him what they knew about the helicopter in the enemy camp. "There was no helicopter," replied the comandante. Denis asked how he knew that. It turned out that it was just guesswork, wishful thinking. The evident danger in an attack was that in the event of a withdrawal there was a mile of open grassland and no cover until the soldiers got back to the fringe of the jungle. Denis asked who was going to man the machine gun nests on the dirt road from the camp to our location in case there was an attack and who was going to man the position on the other side because there was a chance of an attack from there as well. One machine gun, manned by two men, could easily pin down a whole truckload of soldiers until our side had found safety. The comandante had never heard of such a tactic. But he gave himself all kinds of airs just the same; he maintained that he had killed many men mano a mano and was about to do so again. Continuing to rave about his valor, he promptly ordered the retreat.

The little soldiers left a deep impression on me. These children forced into warfare are more real to me than many people I have been involved with in my life. Sometimes I ask myself if there isn't a horrible version of existence where children are the real soldiers and grown-ups merely imitate them. Perhaps it's no coincidence that as I write this, I'm working on a feature film about child soldiers. The story is about a violent and

unbelievable encounter in West Africa between some UN peacekeepers and child soldiers manning a checkpoint on a bridge in the jungle.

I found these notes from the shoot of my film *Ballad of the Little Soldier* (1984) on the border of Honduras and Nicaragua.

### ***BALLAD OF THE LITTLE SOLDIER I***

*Lizards skitter over the burned forest floor. Days after the forest fire seems to be over, the resinous roots continue to smolder deep in the ground.*

*Training camp for the child soldiers. The youngest are just eight years old. One of the children had reconnoitered a bridge in enemy hands and built a very detailed model of it. There was then an attack on the bridge, which failed. Two of the children were killed because, less impressed by death than the adults, they were always sent off in the front line of any operation. Raul assured me that if they had had access to medals for valor those two would have earned them. But even if they had, medals weren't given out to headless chickens.*

*The model of the bridge even showed damage to a support that the real bridge had received. It was set up on a table that, like the real place, had been strewn with sand. It was covered by a plastic sheet that was opaque with mold. All around the model I see tiny craters in the sand, and my first thought is that these are replicas of shell bursts from the failed attack, but then I notice something moving around in some of them. There were little beetles kicking up sand with their hind legs. Digging in.*

### ***BALLAD OF THE LITTLE SOLDIER II***

*To follow a river to its source is something he thought senseless. Just for curiosity's sake? Why? The boy who had done it, just nine years old, he had been court-martialed. It was a matter of hastening from triumph*

*to triumph. Raul, the bastard, is in charge of training the little soldiers. He insisted in a way that makes clear that he believes it himself: ambushes are not his thing, that was a cowardly way of operating. The young woman he was gripping by the behind nodded to him in complicity. That did him good.*

*He preferred fighting man to man, eye to eye, hand to hand, mano a mano. He couldn't tell anymore how many he had killed; he had stopped counting. The young woman slid nearer to him.*

*To either side, level with his collarbone, he carries hand grenades, he calls them his spare set of balls. The girl, playing at virginal innocence, said, "Ay Diosito! He took the boys here and made men of them, with cojones. The finishing touch to his warrior costume is something I have never seen before. On a diagonal belt over his right shoulder blade, he carries a combat knife, whose handle just overtops his back. In a hand-to-hand fight to the death that was how he could draw fastest. Later, I hear Denis's contemptuous laugh, more of a brief snort.*

*When they run, the little soldiers utter shrill screams. They were copying the cries of grown men. Raul had told them to do it. The forest still smells of fire and bubbling resin. I stand by the stream with my feet in the murky warm water. Its small black and yellow camouflaged fish nibble aggressively at me between my smallest toes. When I started thinking about our options, they left me, and turned in fury on a dead leaf that was drifting in the water.*

### **BALLAD OF THE LITTLE SOLDIER III**

*The soldiers walk by with quiet voices.*

*One little soldier carried his plastic cup balanced on his head. He had filled the cup with a sand pie.*

*I found a fishing hook with a bit of line stuck in the bark of a pine tree by the river. I caught nothing on it.*

*Denis expertly crushed a very large scorpion that had spent the night under me in my hammock. I had felt it but thought it was my cigarette lighter that had slipped out of my pocket.*

*Someone was trying out a new chain saw in the jungle.*

*Someone else was looking for a radio station all morning.*

*One was smoking, one was asleep, one was sharpening his machete on a flat stone.*

*Then a lull. Just ants on the march; no one knows where from; no one knows where to.*

*Pine needles blowing down from the charred black trees.*

*For military purposes, a rope has been put up between two trees, very taut. What purpose is unclear.*

*There is a bird here with a bright-orange body and black wings.*

*There is another bird that screams as though it screamed into an empty pot.*

*Two hundred of his soldiers killed, by their own reckoning, three thousand enemies. "I think that qualifies as a victory," says Raul.*

*No one passed my hut today. The lice are beginning to prevail.*

*I have to measure certain things afresh: the summer heat in the open pinewoods, the smell of resin after a forest fire, the children's crusade.*

*One small soldier drew a watch on his wrist in ballpoint pen. All the time he drew, he was smiling.*

*Raul hinted that he could identify interlopers from their snorting. Just as one recognized heathens by their raging. Heathens rage.*

*The little soldier with the name Fuenterrabía, angry fountain spoke to me. No, that wasn't his nom de guerre; it was his real name. His mother was chopped to pieces with a machete before his eyes.*

*Fuenterabía, who doesn't know his age but is certainly under ten, showed me his feet, sore from long marches. He spoke of sore fish floating with their bellies up, and he spoke of the great fire. Now there was only the sore forest.*

*Christ on a bike.*

## **BALLAD OF THE LITTLE SOLDIER IV**

*Río Coco. Night. Forest camp not far from the river. The undergrowth is exceptionally thick here. It starts raining. Deep silence of the troop. One stifles a cough in a sheet; it sounds as though he has TB. A little soldier, a few hammocks away from me, says “Bueno” in his sleep.*

*Jorge Vignati, my friend, the most dependable on Fitzcarraldo and other films, slept on the ground in the rain without a mat or hammock and didn’t even wake up when his pants were sodden with water. The team we have been embedded with, a commando unit, is poorly led and sorry for itself. We have already been behind enemy lines. When a few shells came down in the jungle reasonably close but far enough not to do any damage because the creeper cover stifles the effect of shrapnel, the men were on the point of running away back to the river, but it was only on the river that they would be in actual danger because they would be exposed there and visible. They couldn’t see the enemy positions in the thickets by the river, so they wouldn’t be able to return fire with any purpose.*

*In the morning, with great effort, we covered two hundred yards in two hours. At this rate, it’ll be another eight weeks until we reach our objective, the enemy camp. In the tangle of underbrush, I can see a few men in front of me hacking away as though digging a tunnel. The little soldiers are behind me. They will be sent forward when there is contact with the enemy. A small black wasp went straight for my eye and stung my lower lid. My face is completely swollen from it.*

*Moments after setting out, I was so soaked in sweat that even my belt and my leather bags are wringing wet. We spent most of the time standing still because the advance guard with their machetes are making such slow progress. I stand, carefully pulling apart blossoms that are so strange; it’s as though they didn’t belong in our world. We heard a single shot north of us. In the afternoon, there was more shelling some way off to the east. We drank water from a troubling*

*mudhole. We put disinfectant tablets in it, which didn't make it any cleaner, but it was drinkable.*

*"We've been spotted," said Raul. He drew up the little soldiers in formation. Then he had them salute in the little clearing. Salute whom? Why? He gave the order for retreat, and it seemed clear that his talk of a frontal attack on the enemy position was so much bluster. Denis was pitiless in making that clear. Raul ordered the little soldiers, still standing at attention, to stand there after we were gone. There were vultures over the clearing to the east. They hung motionless in the torpid air, but they know where they're wanted, like clouds of ill fortune. In the air, their circles seem frozen, like the black breath of pestilence and death.*

*Back at camp. An indescribable cloudburst. Chickens tethered with raffia around one foot. They've been forgotten in the downpour. They seem to know that no one will think of them. Their plumage is sodden and black; they stand there perfectly impassive in the black rain, occasionally lit up by lightning bolts, trembling gently to themselves. Bushes and whole trees, roots in the air, are swept downstream in the lashing rain.*

*Then a whole island of uprooted trees drifts past, on which a skinny dog keeps a low profile, like a stowaway. My thoughts follow him, sailing away in the storm.*

### **BALLAD OF THE LITTLE SOLDIER V**

*Gently, undistracted, he pushed the cigarette this way and that with the toe of his boot. The only way it could fall between the cracks into the sea washing around under the veranda of the bar was if he aligned it exactly. I noted that the soldier had just lit it and taken only two drags from it. Then he picked it up and carefully put it out on the table.*

*"Cuentame algo," I said to him. Tell me something. "No, nothing to*

*say,” he answered. He had his M16 leaning against the table next to him. He was too young to be a soldier. He looked very Indigenous.*

*His name was Paladino Mendoza, he said; a name exists forever even if you’re dead. We looked along the pier to the lagoon beyond, where a ferry had run aground. The propeller was stirring up sand. The only visible cargo on the flat deck was a small car whose driver was alternately accelerating and braking. There wasn’t more than two yards of space. This happened a few times, and the ferry wobbled a little but remained stuck.*

*Overhead was a wheel of vultures, black and ominous. There are too many stars at night too. This here is a war for children. Sleepiness settles over everything. There is the word “bliss,” the words “yolk,” “turn up one’s toes,” “ninety-one.” Gunfire alarmed me. The soldier Paladino Mendoza was gone. I didn’t notice him leave.*

*I next saw him on the pier amid more gunshots, closely spaced. I thought the firing was at the freighter at the end of the pier because a few men were crowding together, looking for cover. Following where they were looking, I saw a boy hurriedly pushing aside his moped. Then, all alone on the pier now, I saw the soldier Paladino with his rifle pressed against his hip and emptying his magazine into the air. Everyone was looking at him. He wanted their attention.*

*Then he calmly took his rifle in both hands and shot himself in the mouth. Since he had the muzzle in his mouth, the shot this time sounded like no shot I had ever heard. As though sitting down, he lowered himself and simultaneously collapsed backward. Another little soldier came crying toward me on the pier. I picked up one of the cartridges off the boards, still hot, knowing it couldn’t give me any information. The police chief came running up with drawn pistol and waved it around uselessly for a while. Now he too is standing there in the slowly drying blood playing pocket billiards. His canine teeth are framed in silver.*

*I saw that Paladino Mendoza had the ring pull of a Coke can on his finger. His brains were a yellow foaming mess streaked with bright blood. The palms of his hands were turned upward. His eyes too were*

*gazing upward, emptily into emptiness. He lay there quite tidily, his face collected, the storm inside him calmed. It started raining quietly and his hands, no longer sentient, caught some of the drops.*

*Right by Paladino's feet were a few coarse, torn, paper cement sacks. They were left there because they had absorbed moisture and had long since caked into gray cracked chunks. A pig pretended to snuffle the concrete, but its eyes were on the corpse. It had tried to lick the pasty brains, and someone had shooed it away with a kick.*

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## CHATWIN'S RUCKSACK

While I was working on the preparations for *Green Ants* in Australia, I read in a newspaper that Bruce Chatwin was presenting his new book, *On the Black Hill*, in Sydney. I knew his extraordinary *In Patagonia* and also his short novel *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, about a Brazilian bandit in West Africa who becomes the greatest slave trader of his time and viceroy of Dahomey. In practically all of my films, I had devised the story line and written the script myself, but I had many times quietly pondered about this novel as the basis for a feature film. I got in touch with the publisher in Sydney. No, Chatwin was already back in the Outback researching a new book. I left my Melbourne number, from where I was organizing my shoot, and asked to be informed the moment Chatwin appeared on the radar. A week later, I got a call. If I phoned a certain number at Adelaide Airport, I might be able to contact him. To my surprise, Chatwin knew right away who I was; he knew a number of my films, and to my still greater surprise, he had my book about my walk to Lotte Eisner, *Of Walking in Ice: Munich to Paris*, in his rucksack with him. He was just on his way back to Sydney and thence to England. I asked him if he could possibly make a detour via Melbourne and delay his departure. He agreed without a murmur. He could be in Melbourne that afternoon. I didn't know what he looked like and wondered how I would recognize him, and he said simply: "I'm tall and blond and look like a schoolboy. I carry a leather rucksack." When I turned up to collect him with my host, Paul Cox, I picked him out a hundred yards away.

He straightaway—before we had even left the airport—launched into one story after another, and there followed a breathless marathon of forty-eight hours in which, completely wired, we told each other one story after another, but I had little chance of getting a word in edgewise because he talked a blond streak. But I do think I was maybe hard to replace as an opposite number, and we egged each other on; two-thirds of the time he talked almost automatically, and one-third of the time I did. Of course, we also ate and slept. He got my bed in Paul Cox's house, and I slept on the sofa. I've heard since that on other occasions when he had strangers putting him up he would already be telling a story as he was getting out of the car and barely acknowledge his host with a nod. He was straightaway besieged by people who just wanted to listen to him. He and I had a beginning I can never forget.

Because I was partway through my new film, we agreed that I would tackle his story of the fictional slave trader Francisco Manuel da Silva at the earliest possible moment once the financing was in place. Cautiously, I asked him to tell me if anyone approached him to option the book. Another reason we had such direct communications was no doubt because we were traveling on foot. Or more precisely, because we weren't backpackers who carry practically an entire household on their backs in the form of a tent, a sleeping bag, and cooking equipment; we walked long distances almost without baggage. The world reveals itself to those who travel on foot. In Bruce's case, this was paired with his deep understanding of nomadic cultures and his conviction that all human problems stemmed from the forsaking of nomadism. It was only with the beginning of a settled way of life that you got towns, settlements, monocultures, and technology—all the things that are harmful to the prospects for humanity. Of course, there was no chance of turning back the wheel of progress. Bruce liked my ten commandments, my catalog of the sins of modern civilization—among them the first domestic pig, not to be compared with the first dog as a dog could be your companion on the hunt, and the first climbing of a mountain for the sake of it. Petrarch was the first person we know of who climbed a mountain, and from the letter he wrote in Latin about it, we can feel his

shudder at having done something extraordinary, almost forbidden. Mountain peoples like the Swiss, the Sherpas, the Baltis—it never occurred to them to climb a mountain!

I was perhaps the only person with whom Bruce could talk readily about the sacred aspect of walking. My own walk from Munich to Paris to visit the gravely ill Lotte Eisner in the winter of 1974 had had something ritualistic about it, a way of putting off her looming death. At the time, she didn't even know I was on my way for three weeks through the snow. When I arrived, as if by a miracle, she was almost healthy and had been released by the hospital. My walk had had something of a charm or sacrifice about it; it was a kind of pilgrimage. Eight years later, now eighty-eight, she summoned me back to Paris. She was almost blind, could hardly walk, and said: "I've had enough." Could I not break the spell that prevented her from dying? She said it as a joke, but I could feel she really meant it, and I replied with an equally flippant gesture. The curse was now lifted. She died a week later.

Our way of walking, Bruce's and mine, forces us to seek shelter, to throw ourselves at the mercy of strangers because of our utter defenselessness. I can't remember he or I ever being turned away because there is a profound, almost a holy, reflex of hospitality that is only seemingly obliterated in our civilization. But there were many times in my life when there was no village, no farmhouse, no roof within reach. Then I slept in fields, in barns, and under bridges, and when it was raining and freezing and there was nothing but an empty hunting lodge or remote holiday cottage, then breaking into it was not a problem for me. I have often broken into locked-up houses, not causing any damage, because I always carry a little "surgeon's kit" with me, a couple of wire rods with which I can open security locks. I will leave a note behind, thanking the owners, or I'll finish the crossword puzzle on the kitchen table. In my unease with what is practiced in film schools all over the world, I started a thing called the Rogue Film School, a countermethod, a guerrilla school or hedge school where the only two things I actually teach are the forging of documents and

the cracking of Yale locks. Everything else is instructions to dodge prevailing systems and make films out of yourself.

One day, I got a letter from Bruce saying that David Bowie was interested in acquiring the rights to *The Viceroy of Ouidah*. It seemed he wanted to play the lead himself. I called Bruce and said: "Good god, Bowie is completely wrong; he's far too androgynous for your character." Bruce shared my opinion, and I scraped together what money I could and bought an option on the novel. Kinski would play the bandit. Bruce was very impressed by Kinski, whom he'd seen in other films. *Cobra Verde*, as I called the film when it appeared in 1987, was to be the last of five collaborations between Kinski and me. At that time, Kinski was like a demon, driven by madness. Privately, he was already in another film, one of his own, about Paganini. Of course, he didn't just call it *Paganini* but *Kinski Paganini*. He had been on at me for years to take on the directing, but his script, which was six hundred pages long, was, in the term of art, "beyond repair." Right at the start of our shooting *Cobra Verde* in Ghana, he terrorized my cameraman to such a degree that the situation became unbearable. Kinski demanded that the man be fired even though he had known since *Aguirre* that Thomas Mauch was a world-class cameraman. It was inevitable that the shoot would stop, but Thomas Mauch saw that I couldn't stand up for him, and he withdrew from the film. Deep inside me, I feel I betrayed him. I wish I could have summoned the loyalty to support him, but then the film wouldn't have been made and, above all, the harm to all our other collaborators would have been irreparable. Working on films has its destructive aspect. If you look over the history of filmmaking, you will see the ground is littered with wreckage. It's just as well that Thomas Mauch could deal with it. He later worked on projects for other directors and made films of his own. I never worked with Kinski again, but that was for other reasons. In five feature films I had brought out completely different characters in him, and now there was nothing left to discover. In Kinski's favor, I must say that he could often be extraordinarily generous and supportive, and that we had times of deep comradeship. My film called *My Best Fiend* is evidence of that. He could be respectful and lovable to

female costars. This was especially clear with Claudia Cardinale and Eva Mattes. He recognized the unique talent and aura of these actors. But the collaboration between the two of us was often maniacal to the point of endangering us. Each had plans to murder the other, but that was probably pantomime. One night I clambered up to his hut in a redwood forest north of San Francisco—the normal approach was on the other side—to attack him, but I didn't feel quite so sure of myself, and when his sheepdog started barking, I took that as a welcome sign to retreat. Only once, on *Aguirre*, when Kinski packed his things and loaded them onto a boat to leave the shoot with two weeks to go, which was not possible because we were working on something that was bigger than both of us, did I actually threaten to shoot him. My voice was calm and I was carrying no weapons, but Kinski could tell that this was no empty threat. I had already taken his Winchester off him, which he occasionally liked to shoot off into space. That was perfectly allowable behavior in the jungle, and he thought he could ward off jaguars and poisonous snakes that way, but one evening, after the end of filming for the day, some thirty extras were playing cards in their hut and drinking aguardiente, and Kinski got an attack of rage because their distant laughter reached his isolated hut on a separate hillside and disturbed him. He fired off three shots at the offending hut, which had bamboo walls that were about as much protection as sheets of paper. It was pure chance that he hit none of the huddled bodies and only took off the top joint of one young man's middle finger. On *Fitzcarraldo*, the Asháninka Campas were clearly afraid of his rampages, and they would sit on the ground in a circle, whispering. There were never loud disputes between them. One of their chieftains told me later that I had seen that they were afraid but that I wasn't to think it was fear of the roaring maniac; it was of me because I was so quiet. He offered to kill Kinski for me. I politely declined, but I know they would have done it like that.

I invited Bruce to Ghana to the *Cobra Verde* shoot, but he wrote that he was so sick he could no longer travel. He had caught some extremely rare fungal infection that had spread through his bone marrow. The mold had only ever been found on a whale stranded in the Red Sea and on bats in a

cave in Yunnan, China, which he had actually been to. Later, it turned out that the mold was actually a symptom of AIDS. I kept on asking him to visit, and suddenly his condition improved, and he asked if he could come in a wheelchair. I told him that the terrain and location were not suitable for that. I wrote: "But I can arrange for a hammock for you and six bearers plus a man with a big parasol as an escort like the local kings have." That did it —he couldn't resist. It turned out that he was still able to walk, although for only short distances. He wrote about his visit in his book *What Am I Doing Here*. He was especially impressed by the king we had in the cast, His Majesty the Omanhene of Nsein, Nana Agyefi Kwame II, who liked to appear in full regalia with a retinue of 350, including drummers, dancers, wives, and a court poet. For the film we had also hired some 800 young women to play the army of Amazons, who were drilled by the best Italian stunt coordinator, Benito Stefanelli, on a running track in Accra. Stefanelli, who had choreographed countless brawls in spaghetti westerns, was faced by an army of young women who were eloquent, confident, and almost impossible to control. Bruce witnessed a minor rebellion in our location in Elmina and describes the scene in his book with a kind of shocked alarm. As well as Kinski, I had this army of wonderful and difficult Amazons to deal with, and I remember an incident when the weekly pay was due to be delivered. After the end of filming, the women got changed in the courtyard of our fort, and I knew from experience that they did not then stand patiently in line to be registered and paid. They simply made a mass dash for the table with the money and paperwork on it, and everything ended in complete chaos. This time the local staff decided they would use the narrow tunnel-like passage between the courtyard and the outer gate as a kind of natural bottleneck to gain some control over the expected dash. Grave mistake. When it became known that the money was waiting outside, they all rushed to the heavy main gate, in which, quite deliberately, to restrict their numbers, a small door had been left open. Within seconds, several of the women had become jammed in the narrow doorway, and the pressure from behind was such that I could see some of those at the front had lost consciousness where they stood. There was nowhere for them to collapse,

because of the crush behind them. They stood upright and were unconscious. Those pushing from the rear had no idea what was happening farther forward, and they shouted and yelled. I screamed vainly at the ones pushing because I understand that a few pounds of pressure from eight hundred bodies would make thousands of pounds of pressure on the ones at the front, a situation that could in seconds become deadly. This explains the occasional tragedies in soccer stadiums and the like. Outside at the table with the piles of banknotes—Ghana was then suffering from galloping inflation, and money needed to be brought in on wheelbarrows—there was one soldier standing guard. I shouted that he was to fire a shot in the air, but he was frozen with panic. I had to tear his rifle from him and fire it myself. Frightened, those pushing into the tunnel withdrew, and only then did four or five unconscious women slip to the ground.

Bruce's condition worsened in the two following years without my even knowing how sick he was. In 1987 he made it to the Wagner festival at Bayreuth, where I was directing *Lohengrin*. He came with Elizabeth, his wife, having driven most of the way in his Citroën 2CV. I made a documentary film next in the southern Sahara about a nomadic tribe called the Wodaabe; there was an annual tribal meeting in the semidesert in Niger, where there was a kind of marriage market. Men, presumably the most handsome in the world, beautified themselves in daylong rituals, and the women then chose the most beautiful man with the greatest appeal. They would also get to pick one of the group of dancing men for the night, and if they weren't happy with him, they sent him back. I had told Bruce about the edit of the film, and he wanted very much to see it. When *Herdsmen of the Sun* was finally finished, I got a call from Elizabeth from Seillans in Provence, where Bruce had retreated to an old house. He was very ill but still badly wanted to see my film. I got in my car and drove from Munich to see him. I had the film with me on a video cassette.

When I arrived, Elizabeth stopped me at the door and asked in a whisper if I was sure I wanted to go in because Bruce was dying. Although that gave me a moment to prepare myself, I did get a shock next. There was nothing left of Bruce but a bag of bones and those huge eyes shining from his skull.

He could hardly speak. He asked to be left alone with me. His mouth and throat were covered with a pale layer of mold that had spread into his lungs. The first thing he said to me was "I'm dying." I replied: "Bruce, I can see that." He wanted me to end his torment. Could I kill him? I said: "Do you want me to brain you with a cricket bat or asphyxiate you under a pillow?" He was thinking more in terms of some fast-acting drug. Had he not discussed it with Elizabeth? No, she was too Catholic, impossible to ask her. He forgot about his request. He wanted to see the film now, and we watched the first fifteen minutes. Then he drifted away into unconsciousness. When he came around again, he wanted to see the rest, so we watched it all, bit by bit. They were the last images he saw. His legs—he called them his "boys"; they were now skin and bone—hurt him, and he asked me to arrange his boys differently, and I did so. Then he again came out of his semicomatose state and called out: "I have to be on the road again; I have to be on the road again!" I said: "Yes, Bruce, that's where you belong," and he looked at his legs and saw that there was nothing left of him, no body, just a flaming soul, and he said to me: "My rucksack's too heavy for me." I replied: "Bruce, I'm strong; I can carry your rucksack for you." He watched the film until it was finished. After two days, he told me that he was embarrassed about dying in front of me, and I said I understood even though I wasn't afraid of staying with him. When I finally left in accordance with his wish, he said in a moment of utter clarity: "I want you to have my rucksack, Werner; I want you to carry it for me." I left him, and a couple of days later, Elizabeth took him to the hospital in Nice, where he died a few hours later. It was Elizabeth who sent me Bruce's rucksack, which was in their house near Oxford. The rucksack isn't a souvenir or a relic; I use it. Of all the things in my possession, this rucksack made of stout leather by a saddler in Cirencester is the most precious to me.

Less than two years after Bruce's death, this rucksack was to prove its worth. I had started to make the feature film *Scream of Stone*. The idea for it had been Reinhold Messner's, and the story line was about the race of two mountaineers up the hardest of all mountains, Cerro Torre in Patagonia. This mountain looks like a two-kilometer-high needle of granite crowned

by a dome of ice and frozen snow. Very few mountaineers have made it up there, just the crème de la crème. On an average weekend, twice as many climbers scale Everest as have ever got to the top of Cerro Torre. In addition to the smooth, forbidding walls, there are the indescribable storms of southern Patagonia. Walter Saxon produced and contributed to the screenplay, which later turned out to be a problem, as in such cases I always like to adapt the story to my own way of seeing. This time, though, I met with stubborn resistance, and I was finally told that I had to proceed exactly as per the provided storyboards, which is something that a snowstorm and a cliff face might have other ideas about. The storyboards and the editing turned out to be the crux of the film, but I can live with that. Most films work that way. I would have wished, though, that the film was either all Walter Saxon's or all mine, as it is not quite either's.

In the film, our lead, Vittorio Mezzogiorno, wears the leather rucksack as a tribute to Bruce Chatwin. I used it when it wasn't needed in a shot. In one sequence where the rivals have reached the dome just below the peak, the younger of the two falls in his harness and is killed. The part was played by a real mountaineer, Stefan Glowacz, who had won the title of Rock Master, a kind of unofficial world champion. Because of storms farther up the mountain, we had moved some of the shooting down into the valley. For more than a week, we could neither see the mountain nor get anywhere near it. Then suddenly there was a break. The clouds dispersed; there followed a still, calm night full of stars. In the morning, there was blue sky, sun, and nothing stirring. We were certain we could now shoot the difficult scene near the summit and had chosen a mushroom-topped mountain some way from the actual one that could be reached along a narrow snowy ridge. Only we had to be quick about it. We decided to send Stefan Glowacz, a climbing cameraman, and me as an advance guard by helicopter onto the ridge, and there Glowacz, in consultation with the cameraman and me, could start to deploy his rope and secure it. That way we would save some time, then within twenty minutes, the group of support climbers would arrive, set up camp for security, with tents, sleeping bags, ropes, and food. This was in violation of the cast-iron rules we'd laid down, but there was a brief

meeting of the climbers, among them some of the world's best, and we agreed that under the circumstances it was the right thing to do.

The helicopter flew us, the advance guard, up onto the ridge some ten minutes away. There we were set down, and the chopper turned away to collect the safety team. We had just taken a few paces on the ridge; on one side is a glacier in Argentina, going away from Cerro Torre, and on the other side is Chile. On either side, there are sheer drops of a thousand meters down almost vertical granite walls. Then out of the corner of my eye, I saw something odd. On the Chilean side way below us, there were rigid little clouds that looked like perfectly still balls of cotton. The air was so clear that you could see them almost a hundred kilometers away along the Pacific shoreline, but now, all of a sudden, all these white puffy balls were in a kind of silent uproar. They shot up from out of the deep toward us; they looked like nuclear mushroom clouds. I asked Glowacz, what did he think was going on, but he just stood there in astonishment. I had a walkie-talkie on which I straightaway called the helicopter. It was just a distant speck by now, but I saw it turn a circle and come flying back to us. When it was just near enough to touch, the first wave of the storm came up and buffeted the helicopter away.

Within seconds, we were in a whiteout. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face, and there was a hundred-and-forty-mile-an-hour gale and a temperature of twenty below. We clung to one another and managed to reach a firm snow wall, where we dug ourselves in. We had just one ice axe among the three of us and Glowacz's rope, which he needed for his scene, but no tent, no sleeping bags, no food. I had two chocolate bars in one of my pockets and Bruce Chatwin's empty rucksack. We managed to dig out a tiny bivouac not much bigger than a wine barrel. Crouched in there together, we could feel reasonably safe because our breath and body warmth kept the temperature one or two degrees above freezing after we'd blocked up the entrance with chunks of ice. I sat on the empty rucksack so as not to lose too much warmth through contact with the ice. Later on, I heard a version claiming the rucksack had saved my life, but that can't be right because my two companions survived without any rucksacks. Every

two hours exactly, for seconds at a time to save the battery, I contacted our people down in the valley. I broke out the chocolate, so that everyone was free to eat their share when they needed. We spent all day and all the next night huddled together, and then our cameraman, who was a tough and experienced climber, started fading. We put him in the middle between us and made him continually move his fingers and toes because the extremities are the most vulnerable. He was still declining fast, and by the end of the night, he was in poor shape. When I switched on the walkie-talkie, which I kept warm in my armpit, he grabbed it and shouted that he wouldn't survive a second night like this one.

That alarmed the climbers down in the valley. They put together two teams of four to try and get to us by two different routes. One team soon gave up in the face of the storm, poor visibility, and the icy cold. The second got to within a few hundred yards of us—vertically—but then the strongest man of all, the best Andean climber in Argentina, pulled off his gloves with his teeth and snapped his fingers to order a cappuccino. His comrades had to rescue him and carry him down almost as far as the glacier; then they were taken down a little farther by a small avalanche. There they too dug out a bivouac and felt safe; they had food, sleeping bags, and a gas cooker to boil snow. Up on the ridge, we forced ourselves to eat snow and kept our hands and feet moving. We spent the following day like that and another night. On the third day, the clouds parted a little, and the gale dropped, and the helicopter dared to come up but not land on the ridge. We lifted our invalid inside, then in seconds Glowacz swung himself on board, and I pulled myself up into the metal carrier basket. For a moment, I was standing up and ready to creep inside when our pilot shot off in a panic and sent me reeling backward. I grabbed one of the iron struts of the basket and crouched down, holding on for dear life. In the few minutes it took to get down into the valley, my naked fingers froze onto the metal so hard that I couldn't get them off. Finally, one of our Argentines asked the ladies to retire and pissed over my fingers. They were able to move again. We had been on the ridge for fifty-five hours. The weather deteriorated and stayed bad for the next eleven days.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## ARLSCHARTE

My films were always films on foot. I don't mean it metaphorically either. The walking that I had in common with Bruce Chatwin contributed to a sense of the world that is always palpable in my work, however varied its themes are otherwise. Even before his death, I was wearing his rucksack, or a copy of it that he had made for me in England, on a crossing of the Alps in 1986. Let me stress that I'm just as lazy as the next person; I walked at moments that were existentially important for me. I kept a diary; here are some extracts.

*Thursday, 8 May 1986*

*Tegernsee—Rottach-Egern—Sutten—Valepp. Along the Rottach; it rained all day. A chunk of wood kept drifting into the little whirlpool under a weir, was thrown out, and kept being drawn back into the vortex that pulled it under the frothy surface of the water. I watched it for a long time, and a childhood memory came back to me with ever-greater clarity. I was by the stream in back of the house and was watching a piece of wood in great apprehension. Then a freshly severed branch came down from the waterfall. There were hardly any leaves left on it, and almost all the bark had been scraped off it too. The branch was caught up in the same whirlpool. Then, after spinning for a long time, it knocked the original piece of wood clear. Darkness had fallen, and they were starting to look for me. Lenz, the farmhand who worked*

*on the big farm, found me. He gave me his big rough hand and I wasn't cold anymore.*

*In Enterrottach there was a curling association. They played on asphalt. With a barrel of beer and their own dialect, they were truly among themselves. The rain persists. Spring, trees in flower, the happiness of songbirds. A little higher up, at one thousand meters, there was delicate snowfall.*

*The host in Valepp showed me his lottery ticket for the last quarter. His six numbers were all off by one. The pub used to keep a tame deer called Hansi. As he grew older, he grew mean; finally, he attacked customers with his horns and had to be put down.*

*On the mountain hut beyond the frontier, there was once a white billy goat that drank schnapps and smoked cigars. After his death, they had his head stuffed and mounted, and put him on show in the bar with a cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth. I asked what the goat had died of. "Liver cirrhosis," replied the host, pouring himself a glass of gentian spirits. "Watch out, liver, here it comes," he said to himself, lowering his head and knocking the glass back. Whereupon I ordered one as well. "Yes," said the landlord, he had heard about the deer in Valepp too. Back in 1936, the time of Hitler and so forth, it had gored one of the guests. That was the last of it. In those days, there were no second chances for anyone.*

*Friday, 9 May*

*Outside a mountain chalet, I opened out my hammock. Several of the surrounding buildings were occupied, and my shyness around people forced me to secretiveness. I was trembling so hard that when I held the railing to pull up the hammock the whole of the veranda shook with me.*

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*Sunday, 11 May*

*At night I got so cold, I had to get up and walk around on my veranda; after that, I slept a little. This morning the whole of a stone sea lay before me. The birds woke me. The morning was like purified ore. I walked up the steeply forested slope in deep snow and even deeper silence. Among the firemen in the inn was a youth with Down syndrome in fireman's uniform.*

*From Mühlbach the straight way, following the compass, to St. Johann. Very steep forest path, too steep even for deer. At my first stop, I took out a needle and popped all my blisters. I was conscious of needing more and more courage to be among people in their towns and villages.*

*On walking: again and again (and again), the significance of the world is derived from tiny details never otherwise noted; this is the stuff from which the world may replenish itself. At the end of a day of walking, the wealth of a single day is past counting. When you walk, there is nothing between the lines; everything is in the most immediate and rabid presence: the fences, the meadows, the birds not yet fledged, the smell of newly chopped wood, the puzzlement of the deer. Today is Mother's Day.*

*Above Dienten, I emerged from the woods and stumbled upon a derelict-looking old man, small and stooped, who through a half-blind pair of binoculars was watching a funeral procession trail up to a church. He jumped at my sudden appearance and seemed to feel shame for his broken windows and the bleached, loosened tiles on his roof. His hands and hair looked as though they hadn't been washed for years. Behind his collapsing hut, someone had parked a VW that was without an engine, doors, and wheels. "Yes," he told me, he lived here alone. Had I come over the mountain through all that snow? He didn't want to let me carry on down the extremely steep slope; to please him, I took the path instead, following the serpentines.*

*Grossarl—Hüttschlag. Hüttschlag would seem to be the last place on earth where I can find anything in a little general store. I'm going to spend the night at an inn. The main ridge of the Tauern Alps looks high, very high, and covered with deep snow. I'll pick up a loaf of bread to take, and some bacon.*

*Monday, 12 May*

*Hüttschlag. After making my purchases in the morning, I cut myself a stout stick about an arm's length longer than I am, then I followed the course of the stream upward. The landscape quickly turned wilder and more dramatic. Deep snow, a flock of chamois, waterfalls. I kept crashing through the surface up to my hips in wet snow. I swore, then was reconciled to the God of the early mountaineers. My gaiters and my staff acquire a worth, I thought to myself, that no one will ever guess. That made me a little more contented, like a person totting up his two valuables.*

*I followed a two-week-old human trail that then stopped. No one has been here. Extraordinarily steep ascent along several snow courses, then I saw a hunting lodge plastered with warnings, private property secured by automatic spring guns. Snow hens fled from me. I barely saw them because, even though the weather was bad and the sky was gray, I was starting to get snow-blind. I didn't have sunglasses with me, which was stupid. My eyes were sore and the lids were puffy, but I could still just about see where I was going. My aim at the Arlscharte, the ridgeline, was different in the snow than I had assumed originally, but I mustn't miss it for anything in the world. So I spent a very long time on a snow mound brooding over the map and compass. The last place I'd been, they'd told me not to attempt, not on any account. They warned me that at the end of the war, in these same days of May, a lot of soldiers, young, strong fellows, had tried to reach their home in Carinthia, and many of them had come to grief in the Arlscharte trying*

*to get over the main ridge of the Alps. They were buried in avalanches or disappeared forever.*

*Way up, toward the ridge, I often sank up to my chest in snow— incredibly labored climbing. Right at the Arlscharte, a short, very steep avalanche slope that I avoided by climbing the rocks flanking it. Suddenly south of me lay the Malta valley and its imposing dam. Spots of ice were floating on the lake. The hotel by the dam is still closed, but with my weeping, sore eyes, I saw three men. Then I saw that there was an extraordinarily steep snowfield in front of me to the south and that there was no getting around it because the rock above was not manageable without equipment—crampons, spring hooks, and a rope. What to do? Turn back all the way, a detour of maybe a hundred kilometers? I thought for a long time and walked up to the avalanche slope and contemplated it. It looked somehow sinister. The slope creaked and made a strange sound, a hiss like the hissing of a snake. Something wanted to burst, but it held. Without my having made any sort of decision, I saw myself leaping across the slope in quick bounds. When I reached the middle, there was a bang, as though a very large, not quite fully inflated balloon had burst. It was both sharp and muffled. When I had forded the steep slope, I saw with heart racing that the snow directly below my tracks had a deep crack about a meter wide that went all the way across. The snowfield had not broken though.*

*At the Kölnbreinsperre, the technical team was servicing the dam. They had been there all winter and were still snowed in and cut off from the outside world. A helicopter brought them food from time to time, and they had a telephone. They couldn't believe that I'd come down from the Arlscharte. They studied my tracks in the snow with their binoculars and conferred quietly with one another. Their assumption seemed to be that I was an escaped convict. Why had I done it? They wanted to know why I had come down that way. I replied that actually I wanted to tell no one in the world, but I was on my way to propose to my wife, and that was something best done on foot. The men then showed me their work on the inside of the dam. In endless galleries*

*inside the concrete walls hung pendulums by which they were able to read the deformations of the wall. Several measuring stations. Dams have a very complicated inner life.*

*One of the engineers dictated a school paper to his daughter over the telephone on the subject of spring even though he was still stuck in winter. One man spent hours each day on various fitness equipment; another one looked after the hydroponic plants of the entire hotel, which he had clustered in the lobby all the way to the office. I slept on the fourth floor of the empty hotel. I was given the choice of floors. At the end of the day, I strained my ears—I thought I heard a very distant cuckoo down the valley.*

*Tuesday, 13 May*

*Clear, blue day. Later this afternoon, as luck would have it, the team is being relieved; a helicopter is on its way. They are packing. One of them is doing the dishes, several days' worth, down in the kitchen. I help the one called Norbert Gigler sweep the floors.*

*They wanted to give me a torch for the tunnels farther down the valley, but impulsively I turned it down. Still there were avalanches and rockslips coming across the road. Ghostly feeling, groping through a pitch-black tunnel with no light. The lower end of the topmost tunnel is almost completely choked off by an avalanche, clumps of wet snow and ice are pressed deep inside the tunnel. Right up at the top under the vaulted roof there is a narrow opening through which I can dig my way out. Farther down in the valley, I meet teams of road workers starting to clear the tunnels. The first worker I met as I crawled out of the top of the tunnel was sitting on his snow blower eating a sandwich. In his bewilderment, he stopped chewing. I greeted him and walked on.*

## WIVES, CHILDREN

had gone on my hike because I wanted to ask for my wife Christine's hand in marriage. The wedding took place in 1986, but however dramatic the gesture of the walk, the marriage didn't last. To speak about my wives violates my natural discretion; I'd just like to say that all the women in my life, without exception, were extraordinary: gifted, self-motivated, warmhearted, and wise. Christine is a highly gifted musician from a family of music pedagogues in Carinthia. At the age of fifteen, she appeared as a pianist in Budapest in a program for young musicians directed by Leonard Bernstein, but at eighteen, she had to give up the piano because of bad inflammation in her wrists. She was politically a radical and wrote for magazines. Our son, Simon, was named for Simon Wiesenthal, for whom she had worked for a while. What became a problem was something we at first refused to see: that because of me she couldn't fulfill her own potential. She refused a job offer to go to South Africa as a correspondent for Austrian TV because I didn't want to move my production company there with her. She was involved in many of my films, not as my wife but as a practical collaborator. On *The Dark Glow of the Mountains*, she did the sound; on *Herdsmen of the Sun*, she took production photos; on *Where the Green Ants Dream* and *Cobra Verde*, she worked on the production; on *Lohengrin* in Bayreuth, she was my assistant because, while I may be an opera director, I can't read music. As a mother, she was a lioness. When Simon was bullied by fellow pupils at his French lycée and finally told her about it, she instantly took him out of the school without

registering him for another one. This was against the law, but she was implacable. For a few weeks, Simon took English classes; he wanted to go to the International School in Vienna. He learned so fast that he was accepted, and within half a year, he jumped all the intermediate stages and was put with “native speakers.” The fact that all my children have turned out well is no thanks to me but to their mothers.

I met Martje, my first wife, on the boat to the United States. She was musical as well, played the harpsichord, and still today sings in choirs, particularly Bach’s choral music. Her true passion, though, is literature. She came from a family of teachers and grew up in Dithmarschen in the far north of Germany with four sisters, a household of women. When she finished her studies in Freiburg, we married. She was in almost all of my early films, *Signs of Life*, *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, and on *Aguirre* she undertook the most ungrateful job of all—administering our practically nonexistent funds in the jungle. I never once heard her complain about it. She was always more my protector than I was hers, according to the masculine role-playing of the age. In *Nosferatu*, she plays a small part as the sister of Bruno Ganz’s Jonathan Harker. Our son got his names from me: Rudolph Amos Achmed, as I’ve already described—Rudolph after my grandfather, Amos for Amos Vogel, Achmed for the last survivor of the diggings at Cos. He makes films, documentaries, and recently a feature film, and he’s a successful writer. His daughter, Alexandra, is my one grandchild so far. Martje was close to Lotte Eisner, with whom I was always on formal terms. Those two called each other *du*. When Lotte wrote her memoirs, *I Once Had a Beautiful Fatherland*, the book was based on recorded interviews with Martje, and Martje was the one who actually wrote it. She refused acknowledgment on the cover; it is only on the copyright page that she’s credited as the author. Martje has deep empathy with others and is capable of extraordinary enthusiasms. We were watching Charlie Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush*, and in the scene where his cabin starts to slide down the slope then teeters on the edge, she was doubled up with laughter. The cinema had old-fashioned seating with wooden chairs. She hit her face so hard against the chair back in front of her that she knocked out

two teeth. I made many mistakes. When I spontaneously decided in 1977 to fly to the Caribbean for *La Soufrière*, the film about the volcanic eruption, I stopped at home for a couple of minutes to pick up my passport. There was our little boy, and it was far from clear whether I would return alive. I mention it because this is not the sort of behavior that a marriage can tolerate. But almost without realizing it, we were growing apart anyway.

I have a daughter with Eva Mattes named Hanna-Marie. Eva wanted the Marie as a reference to her part in my film *Woyzeck*, for which she received the award for Best Actress at Cannes. It was an injustice that Klaus Kinski wasn't awarded the prize for Best Actor, and Eva behaved very graciously to him, as he did to her. I never intended to be in an intimate relationship with any of my actresses, but I fell head over heels in love with Eva when we were both working on *Stroszek* in 1975. Some things are self-evident, but they become more evident when they're said aloud. Eva is without question the outstanding German theater and film actress of her generation. There are other good ones and very good ones, but none with her elemental presence. All the others in retrospect fit in with the trends of their time. Eva Mattes stands outside. She was so caught up in the whirl of her professional engagements, and I in mine, that it was clear we would not be able to live together. Our daughter, Hanna, is a visual artist who builds imaginary sets and locates herself within them. The final result is usually a photograph, but I wouldn't describe her as a photographer. Of late, she has transferred her attention to written texts. I am very curious what she will do next. She has Eva's warmheartedness while her voice and her laugh are so strikingly similar to her mother's that I've occasionally called her Eva on the telephone.

Through Tom Luddy, I met my wife Lena, with whom I've now been married for twenty-five years, at Chez Panisse, a restaurant in the Bay Area. I owe Tom a great deal. Really, he ought to be listed as a national cultural treasure of the United States. As a young theoretical physicist, he studied with the renowned Edward Teller at Berkeley, where he became one of the leaders of the Free Speech Movement. At the same time, he was a junior amateur golf champion and could probably have had a career as a

professional. His revolution-minded fellows at Berkeley attacked him for it, though, saying golf was a bourgeois sport, and Tom gave it up. He ran the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, which under him became the most important place for film culture anywhere on the West Coast. The director Errol Morris was there, and so was the director Les Blank. The Brazilian director Glauber Rocha lived for a long period in Tom Luddy's house. For a few weeks, so did I, under the same roof with Tom and Glauber. It was an intense time for films, ideas, and friendships. I remember Glauber had to go back to Brazil and hurriedly stuffed his belongings into a couple of suitcases because he was about to miss his flight. He made a pile of all his notes and papers, and jammed them under his arm, involuntarily making a paper trail for me as I followed him around the departure hall. When Glauber Rocha died shortly after, far too young, all the samba schools in Brazil were silent for a week. Tom Luddy had invited me to his Pacific Film Archive with my first film, *Signs of Life*, at the end of the sixties, and when he later took charge of the famous Telluride Film Festival in Colorado, I had something like thirty world premieres of various films over the years there.

Chez Panisse has an interesting genesis. Tom at the time was living with Alice Waters, who had her doubts about the Berkeley "revolutionaries." She thought that the so-called world revolution they said was on the way was nothing but a product of theoreticians and academics, and would sputter out. What mattered were the needs of the working classes. Their sustenance, for instance, was fast food and little else; what they ought to do was start a movement for a new, healthy, and affordable eating culture. She started Chez Panisse in 1971, which over the years became the most influential spot for this discussion in the entire country. Whenever I'm in San Francisco or Berkeley, Tom would have me to dinner there; he often said that he would ask one or two friends, but we always ended up at a big table with a dozen or so people around it.

So I was going up the stairs to the upper floor. At the bar, because our table wasn't yet ready, were a couple of young women. One of them turned to me; it was Lena. Apparently, though I don't remember this, I stayed

rooted to the spot on the top of the stairs, transfixed by a bolt of lightning. I had never seen eyes of such beauty and intelligence in my life. That evening, I took a free chair and jammed myself between her and her neighbor, and throughout the entire dinner, she and I talked as though there weren't anyone else around. I learned that in her school days in Siberia she had secretly copied out by hand a couple of books that were banned in the Soviet Union and passed them around among trustworthy friends. She had copied out the whole of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Solzhenitsyn's first book, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. The evening was incomparable. I knew instantly: this is the woman I want to live with.

Only this time I wanted to do everything correctly. I returned to Vienna, where I was still technically married but already separated. I put my house in order and gave away everything I owned. When I returned to the United States, I had no luggage, nothing at all. I wanted a fresh start. I had already gone through passport control and customs when the official called me back and wanted to know where my baggage was. Had I forgotten it on the carousel? It made me look suspicious; if I'd had a bomb on me, I could have left it going around and around on the conveyor belt. I said I had come without anything. The official told me that in twenty-two years he had never seen anyone arriving from another continent without luggage; at most, or least, they would have had a carry-on or a briefcase. Out of sheer stupidity, probably to impress him, I reached into my jacket pocket and produced my toothbrush. That landed me in an interrogation booth for the next six and a half hours as I was being investigated for a possible criminal background. I tried to explain that I had found the woman for me and that I wanted only to be me, no status, no property, no nothing, no certainty even that she would take me. I was allowed in.

At the beginning, we had two plates, two sets of silverware, and two glasses. When we invited friends over, they would have to bring their own under the arm. Lena had never seen a film of mine, and I didn't want to show off with my work; at our first meeting, I just told her that I worked in films and had been a stunt coordinator. I had done all kinds of jobs in the

industry. For a long time, even after I had told her more about the true nature of my work, she wondered whether I had ever made a good film, seeing as almost every film she had seen in the States was feeble and borderline embarrassing. What if all I had made was more such embarrassments? After a year spent agonizing, she secretly saw *Aguirre*, which happened to be running in a cinema. She had taken a seat on the edge of a row so she could run out if she needed to.

I was lucky to find a soulmate who shared my world view. Tom Luddy hadn't planned to bring us together. Statistically speaking, our meeting at all was a freak accident. Lena had only come out to dinner because she was hungry and down to a last can of tuna in her university lodgings. The fact that she was in the States at all was another series of improbabilities. She had grown up in Yekaterinburg in western Siberia in a family of scientists whose forefathers had fled east from Stalin's repression. Her father is an outstanding Russian geophysicist, and she grew up in a home where there were always several hungry students clustered around the table debating in an atmosphere of ideas, of interest in literature, of involvement in the works of great authors. Lena was a gymnast from a young age, but it must have been such torture for her that she quite deliberately didn't do her best in competition because there was a chance she might have been taken into the Olympic squad. She always had excellent grades and, at sixteen, got a place in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, State University, but because she came from an academic background, she had to labor for a year to qualify as working class. She then studied linguistics and philosophy. By another series of chances, she was invited to San Francisco by an American family and found herself unenrolled by her home university because she hadn't reported her short stay abroad in the approved fashion. She was accepted at Stanford, and because Stanford wasn't able to offer her a scholarship, she was invited to do paid work on a project on the idea of Armageddon as a retroactive prophecy. She shuttled between Stanford, Berkeley, and Mills College in the Bay Area. At the end of her philosophy degree, her father gave her a camera, a Russian copy of a Leica. At the time, I was directing *Tannhäuser* in Seville, and Lena took her first pictures in the bullring just a

couple of blocks away. Back in San Francisco, when she was developing the first two rolls of film she had ever exposed as a fee-paying guest in a photographic lab, a gallerist came across the pictures as they were hanging up to dry. They became her first exhibition and a subsequent monograph, *Tauromaquia*. Lena has since published six books of photographs as well as working on other projects, such as *Last Whispers*. This is an oratorio composed from extinct languages that exist only on tape recordings and from critically endangered languages that have only two or three living speakers left. Lena's recordings come with a visual component, a contemplative video. The oratorio received its initial performance at the British Museum and then went on to many other grand venues, such as the Kennedy Center and the Théâtre du Chatelet in Paris. We sometimes joke that she is the first Russian since Diaghilev to fill the house with her own program. In fact, though, she is an American citizen. She was in the United States with a valid passport from the Soviet Union when suddenly that no longer existed as a country; it dissolved. That left her semistateless. If we had married right away, she would have been German, but she didn't want that, nor did I. Forty-eight hours after she acquired her American citizenship, we were married.

We have been through everything together and try not to be apart for more than two weeks at a time. Only once, when I was filming in Antarctica, was I away by myself for six weeks. It's turned out to be better for us not to be working on the same project; in some rare cases, Lena took still photographs for films of mine, *Bad Lieutenant* or *The White Diamond* in the jungle of Guyana, for instance. We were together on the remote Río Pacaás Novos on the border of Brazil and Bolivia where, since the mid-eighties, the largest group of never-contacted jungle-dwelling Indigenous peoples, some 650 of them, were under pressure from the advance of gold diggers and woodcutters. They rejected all contact with modern civilization and had attacked settlers and killed them with arrows. The Brazilian authority for Indian affairs, FUNAI, then decided to try to meet with the nomadic people because that was preferable to leaving the inevitable confrontation to the plunderers. The first carefully arranged meeting with

the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau was recorded on 16 mm film. In 2000 I was invited to a joint project of international directors, among them Wim Wenders. Each of us was to contribute a ten-minute film on the subject of time. The name of the project was *Ten Minutes Older*, but I wanted to make a film called *Ten Thousand Years Older* with a group of isolated people who in the few moments of contact would find themselves moved from a Stone Age existence into the present. The additional tragedy of these encounters was that within a year of the initial contact 75 percent of the tribe had died of chickenpox and influenza, to which they had developed no immunities.

Working our way up the Pacaás Novos was difficult because the river is barely navigable even for little boats; too many fallen trees block its channel. After long preparations, we met the first two war chieftains who had survived the initial contact, Tari and Wapu, outside their reservation. As well as bows and arrows six feet long—like those of the Amahuacas on the *Fitzcarraldo* shoot—they now used shotguns and demanded a shotgun and bullets from us. We complied and exchanged them for some of their arrows. Tari and Wapu demonstrated in stomping gait how they had shot a Brazilian settler from a rooftop and, in a ritual singsong imitating Portuguese, how the dead man's son had cried for help. Before leaving us at the end of the shoot, they rummaged through our things for a few extra presents. It was no problem, but when they wanted our hammocks, I had to refuse because there were thick rivers of ants on the ground, and besides, the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau people knew how to make excellent hammocks themselves. That produced a few moments of tension. As night fell, Lena was worried that we might be attacked under cover of darkness. But why would they do that when they had bows and arrows and shotguns in our original meeting? It was illogical. In the middle of the night, Lena woke me in alarm; she was sitting upright in her hammock beside mine and saying: "They're coming." There were sounds in the jungle, twigs snapping, but it was probably a large animal like a tapir. "If it were them," I said, "we wouldn't hear them," and dropped off right away. I have had some rare moments in my films, how I did it I can no longer say, in which something extraordinary came to me as by God's grace, some mysterious unfathomable beauty and truth, moments

lit up as though from within. The ending of 1971's *Land of Silence and Darkness*, surely my deepest film, is among them. When a farmer, turned deaf and blind, no longer noticed by his family, lives for years with the cows in his cowshed for animal warmth, then suddenly gets up off a park bench and walks into the boughs of an autumnal apple tree. The way the deaf and blind man feels the twigs then the trunk of the tree is the sort of moment you can't really describe. So too is the scene in *Ten Thousand Years Older* when Tari studies a large ticking kitchen alarm clock we brought with us. His expression and the clock—if I had filmed nothing else in my life but that moment, it would have been worthwhile.

The best situations were always those when I was making a film and Lena was developing a photo project parallel to it. On *Wheel of Time*, my 2003 film with the Dalai Lama, she was working alongside me on a book project called *Pilgrims*. I often carry her cameras for her, which are pretty heavy, some specifically for large-format prints on celluloid. When we circumambulated the sacred mountain of Kailash in Tibet with a hundred thousand pilgrims, she suffered altitude sickness at some five thousand meters. Our yak, brought along by two of our guides to carry baggage, all at once dropped its burdens and stampeded off into freedom. Our guides were then loaded with food and a tent to the limit of their strength, and when Lena could no longer set her feet in front of each other, I took her rucksack in addition to my own. We had separate projects on the table-top mountains on the border of Venezuela and Brazil; we were in Mexico; we were in Japan for the opera *Chūsingura*, where Lena met Hiroo Onoda with me, the Japanese soldier who only surrendered twenty-nine years after the end of the Second World War. From various separate indications, he had come to the conclusion that the war was still in progress; only afterward did he learn that these were already America's successor wars in Korea and Vietnam. In 2022 I published a short novel about him, *The Twilight World*. Lena and I were together in the Chauvet Cave in the Ardèche region of France for *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*; we were in the Baltics for the feature film *Invincible*, in Morocco for *Queen of the Desert*, and in the Uyuni salt flats in Bolivia for *Salt and Fire*. For my newest feature film shot in Japan,

*Family Romance, LLC*, Lena once again took the production photos, and *Meeting Gorbachev* was a special experience because we were both in Russia. We speak neither German nor Russian with each other because it has turned out that it is good for us to meet on a plane that is neither all hers nor all mine. It makes us both careful in a language that was originally neither of ours.

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## WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

For a feature film project that was offered to me, a movie that was based on J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, we were together hunting for locations in Kashgar in the autonomous region of Xinjiang in China; from there, we went into the mountains, heading toward the clustered borders of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. I wanted to look farther in the Hindu Kush and the northern Pamirs. There, in Tajikistan, I had once played the role of a fanatical prophet in Peter Fleischmann's science fiction film *Hard to Be a God* (1989) who is killed off after twenty minutes, treacherously murdered by a spear. I quickly had a good understanding with Coetzee, but the finances for the film never came together. Since that time, everything to do with Kashgar and the situation of the Uyghurs has deteriorated rapidly, but in those days, there was still a weekly market attended by 200,000 Uyghurs from all around. It was like a thousand years ago on the Silk Road, bearded men speaking a Turkic language, Muslims in long robes and fur hats. I remember one little section of the bustling market where some three thousand men were selling nothing but roosters; every man had one under his arm. I remember a completely hopeless traffic jam of eight hundred donkey carts, everything tangled up with everything else and the donkeys braying. I remember how, as though on a signal, a crowd parted and a long lane opened up and a splendid horse came galloping in my direction ridden by a barefoot six-year-old with no saddle. The horse reared up in front of me as if at some ghostly phenomenon, turned on its rear hooves, and

galloped away again. The lane closed up like a sea after it had been parted. The horse was snapped up on the spot. For my film *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done*, I went back to Kashgar for a dream sequence with Lena and my lead, Michael Shannon. In a dream, Michael's character finds himself completely at sea in some strange past life. He walks through a crowded livestock market, and everyone, absolutely everyone, turns to stare at him as though he were an apparition from another world. We fixed a large wooden breastplate to Michael's upper body with three arm's-length tripod legs mounted on it that radiated out from him. On them was a camera focused on his face. As he walked through the crowd, I was completely confident that everyone he walked past would turn to look at him. Michael was fully in agreement with this improvised scene in the exotic location provided I stayed with him at all times. Since we had neither a work permit nor permission to film, which, given the political situation there, we would have stood zero chance of getting, Michael didn't want to be arrested on his own, but if it had to be, then he wanted to be arrested with me. It seemed a reasonable wish to me.

Outside the huge market area was a broad entrance gate with a strong presence of Han Chinese police. We decided to go up to the police and through their ranks just as we were, with that bizarre structure on Michael's chest. I had learned that from Philippe Petit, who had learned his trade on the streets of New York as a tightrope walker, juggler, and magician. When the World Trade Center was almost finished, he had brought in some equipment under some canvas sheeting for tightening his wire and was on his way back down the stairs with a coconspirator—the elevators weren't hooked up yet. It was three in the morning, and suddenly he heard a squad of security police going up the stairs toward them. Then, on an impulse, he did exactly the right thing. He accelerated and started calling out his collaborator, cursing him for his shoddy work, so irresponsible, not up to scratch, he would sue him for nonperformance, he demanded damages. The four-man security party pressed themselves against the walls and allowed the furious shouter to pass. I didn't start yelling at Michael in Kashgar, but we did go up to the very kernel of the police, and I was talking animatedly

in my Bavarian dialect at an imaginary person on the other side of the police cordon because you must never make eye contact, and I asked into the imaginary distance if anyone had seen my friend Hartmut. Here too the officials stood aside and we were able to do our work. Any attempt to avoid them would have aroused their suspicion, but drill into them—this is almost a kind of law of groupthink—and each person tends to think that if there was anything amiss someone else would intervene, so in the end, no one does.

The fact that I dared to take out the diaries I kept during *Fitzcarraldo* is again something for which I have Lena to thank. There are several notebooks where my script, which is usually normal size, grew smaller and smaller and finally microscopic. It can now only be deciphered through a jeweler's eyepiece. Also, I wanted to keep some distance from this very difficult time in my life. Four or five years after the events that occurred between 1979 and 1981, I opened my records and transcribed maybe thirty pages of them, but it was terrible to confront all that again, and I was convinced I would never touch it again. More than two decades later, though, Lena said to me that it was time to think about those notes again as they did exist, otherwise some idiot would get to work on them when I was no longer around. After hesitating for a while, I thought I'd at least try to look at them again, and all of a sudden, it was easy. All the upset, all the oppressiveness, was gone. That went to make my book *Conquest of the Useless*. Similarly, again many years later, and in response to Lena's urging, I went back to my accounts of my meetings with Hiroo Onoda. That gave me *The Twilight World*. What I am writing now also proceeds from Lena's encouragement. My most unusual work, called *Hearsay of the Soul*, I made in 2012 for the Whitney museum in New York. This was a spatial installation with several projections of prints by Hercules Seghers with music by Ernst Reijseger, who has collaborated with me on many recent films. One of the Museum's curators called me to ask about possibly contributing to the upcoming Biennal, but I refused right away, because I have problems with contemporary art. "Why?" the curator asked me. I referred broadly to the art market and its manipulations and its preference

for conceptual art over actual exhibits, but the curator refused to be shaken off so easily. Would I not be interested as an artist? I said that I didn't think of myself as an artist and that this term was better applied to pop singers and circus performers. If I wasn't an artist, then what was I? I said I was a soldier and hung up. Lena, in the room with me, asked what that was about and reminded me that I had a whole series of projects that were neither films nor books but a kind of "interzone" between other forms. She was right, and I called the Whitney back the next day.

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## UNREALIZED PROJECTS

The “interzone” endures. In 1976 I made a film about the world championship of livestock auctioneers, *How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck*, which had to do with my fascination with the limits of language. That’s why Hölderlin and the Baroque poet Quirinus Kuhlmann are so important to me, because in their different ways they approached the limits of my language, German. In *Stroszek*, when Stroszek’s dream of America is broken, his mobile home is put up for auction. The actor in the scene was a one-time world champion livestock auctioneer whom I had followed to Wyoming and brought out of retirement for my film. His auction, in which language becomes singsong, a cascade of madness impossible to intensify further, is surely unforgettable to anyone who sees the film. I always had the suspicion that this raving was the last form of poetry or at least the last language of capitalism. I always wanted to direct a *Hamlet* and have all the parts played by ex-champion livestock auctioneers; I wanted the performance to come in at under fourteen minutes. Shakespeare’s text is widely known anyway, and to prepare for the production, an audience would only have had to refresh their memories of it briefly.

When I was living in Vienna, I think it was in 1992, the Wiener Staatsoper approached me to ask if I’d like to direct an opera. I replied that I’d much rather write one myself; I had most of the music, and I’d just have to come up with the words. That aroused considerable interest. I had a long conversation with their dramaturg; I’ll just call him B. here. My idea was to

write an opera on Gesualdo and use his sixth book of madrigals as the bulk of the music. As Prince of Venosa, Carlo Gesualdo (1566–1613) was independently wealthy, so he was able to compose without being dependent on the church or patrons. His music is par for the music of his time, the late Renaissance, but in his sixth book of madrigals, he wrote music as though all his circuits had blown. Those sorts of sounds were only heard again three centuries later in the late nineteenth century, and it's no accident that Igor Stravinsky, who was strongly influenced by him, undertook two pilgrimages to Castle Gesualdo near Naples. He composed madrigals, *Monumentum pro Gesualdo*, a tribute to his predecessor that was premiered in 1960. Later it was adapted for a ballet.

Gesualdo's life can hardly be beaten for drama. He was the prince of darkness squared. He married the seventeen-year-old Maria d'Avalos, who herself had already been twice widowed. Contemporary accounts speculated that she may have driven her first two husbands to an early death from sexual exhaustion. Once she had married Gesualdo, Maria took a lover, Fabrizio Carafa, the Duke of Andria, a Neapolitan nobleman. Gesualdo learned of the relationship, faked a hunting expedition, and caught them in flagrante. He had them both murdered and went into the chamber to make sure they were properly dead. Then he fled Naples for his castle, and fearing an attack, he leveled the woods around it. To this day, the surroundings of his accursed-looking castle are unforested. The final years of his life, he lived remorsefully in a religious mania, surrounded by young men who were made to whip him with rods. He died presumably of an infection caused by these beatings. Then there was something that I had invented myself, though I never told the dramaturg. In my version, Gesualdo murders his two-year-old son, uncertain whether it was he or Maria's lover who was the father. He has the child set on a swing and rocked by his servants. The child is thrilled, but the servants go on and on swinging it until the child is dead two days and nights later. This is accompanied by choirs standing on either side singing Gesualdo's madrigals on the beauty of death. I had intended to have the swing on very

long ropes and hanging over the apron of the stage so it could swing way out over the heads of the theatergoers.

I didn't hear back from the Wiener Staatsoper for a while, but then, half a year later, there was an announcement that they had commissioned a new opera to be called *Gesualdo*, with a libretto by B. and music by the German-Russian composer Alfred Schnittke. This opera received its world premiere in 1995. I didn't go, but I heard that the public was especially enthused by a scene near the end where Gesualdo has his child sit on a swing—and go way out over the heads of the theatergoers. But then I have always had the feeling that it's better to be robbed than not.

I also had a plan to direct Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* in one particular setting, namely Sciacca on the south coast of Sicily. No one knows this place, and no one talks about it. Sciacca was originally a Carthaginian, perhaps even a Greek, settlement; the little town of forty thousand inhabitants is otherwise pretty nondescript. But it has an opera house. I don't have any evidence, but I've always assumed that the building of this opera house was for no other purpose than to launder the Mafia's money, because it was never opened and never had a director, an administration, a program, any stagehands or electricians, any chorus, any orchestra, any singers, zip. I wanted the opera house to fulfill its function if only once. I would have engaged an orchestra, chorus, soloists, lighting engineers, set designers, the lot. Before the third act, I would have had the premises completely cleared and the audience and performers removed to a safe distance, then I would have blown the opera sky-high. We would have brought the piece to a conclusion on the smoking ruins. The town administration was not unhappy with my idea because the opera was an eyesore anyway, and I had already got in touch with the best demolition firm in America, which was in New Jersey. All I know of the building were pictures and architectural plans, but when I visited Sciacca to get to work, it was clear to me right away that the idea was unfeasible. The modernist pile was reinforced concrete and would have needed a great quantity of dynamite, and right next to the opera, with shrubs growing from it, is a

large hospital that would have gone up as well or at the very least would have been badly damaged.

Because I've recently been attacked by crazily politically correct individuals who wonder why I would direct Wagner in the first place, I now have a series of prepared answers. The first one is a question: Why did Daniel Barenboim conduct Wagner and even do it in Israel? No doubt about it, Wagner's personal character is awful, and worse, he was an antisemite. But he's not responsible for Hitler and the Holocaust any more than Karl Marx was responsible for Stalin. The music that Wagner composed is irresistibly wonderful. Similar questions about guilt and general condemnation arose to do with Kinski after his daughter Pola wrote in a book about continued incest with her father. Pola—like a number of young women lately—had asked me for advice and support before she published her book. I have absolutely no doubt about her account. But does that mean I have to rethink my aesthetic position regarding Kinski and withdraw the films I made with him? My answer here consists of two more questions, though the number could be indefinitely extended. Should we remove the paintings of Caravaggio from churches and museums because he was a murderer? Do we have to reject parts of the Old Testament because Moses as a young man committed manslaughter? At this point, I am generally looked at in bewilderment because, while everyone likes to invoke the Bible, very few people bother to read it.

I wanted to write and produce an oratorio and ballet for elves in a place in Alaska called North Pole. North Pole is the home of Santa Claus and his reindeer. Hundreds of thousands of letters addressed to him are mailed there from the United States and beyond. Most of them express ordinary childish wishes, but every so often, there is one that is shattering. I have read many of them. A girl wishes her dad would stop hitting her mom so she can get out of her wheelchair. There is a sizable company of elves who answer the letters on behalf of Santa. The best students at the local middle school are chosen for elf duty, and the bizarre thing was that from this very group of elves a massacre was planned. At least six kids, none of them older than fourteen, had already armed themselves with their fathers' rifles and pistols;

the date was fixed; the list of prospective victims among staff and students was already distributed. After perpetrating their action, the elves were going to block the railway line that leads through North Pole with some tree branches, then jump onto the freight train that was headed to nearby Fairbanks. They had all failed to notice that these tracks had lain idle for a year. Then they wanted to head out into the wide world under new names like Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. On the eve of the coup against Santa and everything associated with him by way of sentimental feelings, one of the mothers saw details of the plan on her son's computer, and the thing was broken up. All the conspirators were expelled, but there were no other legal consequences. In North Pole I was met with a wall of silence. Under threat of legal sanction, I was denied access to all involved in the plot; the police began to take an interest in my visa; the school even threatened me. I was forced to see that there was nothing doing here.

Erik Nelson had put me on the scent. He is the producer with whom I made *Grizzly Man* in 2005, then the film on the Antarctic and the one about Chauvet Cave. It was he as well who pressed me to start immediately on *Into the Abyss*, for which neither outline nor financing existed, but the imminent execution of the murderer Michael Perry, of course, permitted no delay. Through that film and eight others on death row prisoners, I did indeed see deep into an abyss.

I had run into Erik at a small festival for nature films in Wyoming. He came up to me and helped me to find financing right away and introduced me to a network executive at the Japanese broadcaster NHK who was also present. This was at the time I was doing the preparation for the film *The White Diamond*, which was about an airship in the jungle of Guyana. Back in LA, I visited Erik at his production company in Burbank to thank him for his selfless help. When I got up to go, I noticed I had dropped my car keys and scanned a low glass coffee table freighted with papers, DVDs, and an old half-eaten salad on a plastic plate. Erik, supposing one of the papers had caught my eye, passed me an article. "Here, have a read of this. We're planning something interesting in Alaska." Then, back at home, I read one of the first articles on Timothy Treadwell, who had spent many years living

among wild grizzly bears in Alaska in the belief that he had to protect them from poachers. In his existence in the wild, he had, almost in a Walt Disneyish way, overstepped a limit: he came too close to the bears, he stroked their faces, sang to them, told them how much he loved them. In the course of eleven years, he had collected film of extraordinary quality and beauty, but then he and his girlfriend were attacked and eaten by a grizzly bear one summer. Here, out of nowhere, was a film I had to make. The urgency I felt drove me straight back to Erik Nelson. I asked him how far along they were in the project and learned that they would start filming in not more than ten days because the late summer salmon migration in Alaska had begun, which is when the grizzly bears stand in great numbers on the riverbanks and catch fish. I popped the question: Who's directing? Erik looked at me, and with barely noticeable hesitation, he said: "I am, kind of." I heard the "kind of." I sensed that he wasn't quite sure of himself. I looked at him and said with absolute authority and the certainty of my long-gone religious period: "No. I'm going to direct this film." I held out my hand, and he, reflexively or maybe with relief, shook it. A couple of days later, I was in Alaska.

After *Grizzly Man*, there were, as I said, several more films with Erik Nelson—intelligent and complicated character that he is. After our nine films from death rows in Texas and Florida, there were supposed to be four more films on the same subject, but the last of them wouldn't let me go. It was about a young man who, during a drug-induced exorcism gone wrong, committed the indescribably horrible murder of a little girl who had just begun to walk and talk. Although I had asked the local homicide detectives to show me only pictures of the crime scene, not of the body, they suddenly projected the little girl's body on the screen by accident. I have seen many horrible, horrible things. I've never been afraid to look into an abyss, but I wouldn't want my worst enemy to see what I saw then. As I nevertheless readied myself to make more death row films, I was woken in the middle of the night by a scream. Lena beside me was instantly wide awake; she too had heard the scream. It was my own scream. At that moment, I knew that I

had to end the series and leave the subject there and then. There is such a thing as one's own household of emotions.

There were other film ideas with Erik, but nothing came of them. I was never quick enough to keep up with all the films that suggest themselves to me even when I'm still at work on the one before. It's as if I were trying to keep up with a swiftly flowing river, but I never could, even though I work faster now than I did in my early days. The financing of films has gotten to be more difficult because audiences have changed. The distributors for my films have all disappeared, and the arthouses, which were always somewhat suspect to me anyway, have largely ceased to exist. Then again, my work has a much bigger presence on the internet. I always thought of myself as making mainstream films, but that I was a sort of secret mainstream. But it's just as likely that I was telling myself that to keep my spirits up. With digital cameras and digital editing, I can work much faster than in the past. With a little exaggeration, I might say that I can now cut as fast as I think. Over the course of many films, my style has become more fluent in the way that one gets more fluent in a foreign language.

Still, I find myself pursued by work, as by the Furies, though sometimes I'm the one chasing the Furies. I want to make a film about Onoda on the island of Lubang, then a feature film on child soldiers in Africa, where some nine-year-old soldiers plunder a wedding outfitter's. The groom is barefoot and wears ragged tracksuit bottoms and a coat over his naked torso with the tails reaching down to his heels. The bride, also a boy, wears a far-too-big white dress and is pulling his train along a rain-wet street, his feet teetering in white heels that are also far too big for him. With their Kalashnikovs, the two of them shoot at everything that moves—dogs, cars, people, pigs. A dead body is left on the street, which no one thinks to remove. The corpse is first blackened by flies, then there are the vultures, then the dogs, pulling apart the bones. At the end of two weeks, all that's left of him is a stain. That's how the British Africa correspondent Michael Goldsmith, who was almost brained by Jean-Bédel Bokassa with a golden scepter, described it to me. Bokassa had just had himself crowned emperor of the Central African Republic. Goldsmith spent several months in the

most notorious of dungeons, the N'Garagba Prison. But that was long before our 1990 film about Bokassa, *Echoes from a Sombre Empire*. After our shoot, Goldsmith was in Sierra Leone during the civil war there, was taken prisoner by a band of rebels, and had occasion to see through his barred window how a shot-up corpse was reduced in the space of two weeks to a nasty stain on the road. After his release, Goldsmith saw the premiere of my film *Scream of Stone* in Venice and died just three weeks later. He only saw our Bokassa film on video. In the shoot for *Echoes from a Sombre Empire*, I was in the walk-in freezer unit where French paratroopers, when they drove Bokassa out, found half of the minister of the interior deep frozen, or it may have been some other politician. He was hanging there by the heel, the way a half carcass of pork is hung. Bokassa had had him shot for treason, then gave a banquet at which his guests were served the minister. Because there were only half a dozen at the table, the cook decided to prepare only half the minister; the other half he froze and kept. The second trial of Bokassa, at which he was also condemned to death, was recorded on video; the total length is more than three hundred hours. The cook gives exact accounts from the witness box but is mocked by Bokassa's French defender for claiming that the interior minister's hand had still been twitching when he served it. The lawyer delights those present in the courtroom with impressive dramatics; he cried, then said that the hand, yes, it must have fallen to the ground and run off like a spider. It was his own invention, and one can see that Bokassa is delighted. Eleven years after his military coup, Bokassa had treated himself to a vast spectacle in 1977 that swallowed up a third of his country's GDP when he had himself crowned emperor. The ceremony, with costumes and gilded coaches, was a remake of Napoleon's coronation. A North Korean army band played Viennese waltzes in a specially built arena that resembled Versailles. Bokassa had seventeen wives and fifty-four children that he acknowledged. He had made his favorite, a four-year-old, a field marshal, and the little fellow slept in his fantasy uniform on a velvet podium next to the throne. Bokassa later also claimed to be the thirteenth apostle, but this was not accepted by the Vatican. When I wanted to film the still-intact steel

underpinning of the throne in the abandoned and run-down arena in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, some militia stepped in, and we were arrested by soldiers. Shortly after, the same thing happened again, and we were taken to see the serving minister of the interior. Things weren't looking too rosy, and I decided to wrap up the filming.

I want to write a requiem about the tsunami in Northern Italy, the most terrible one recorded, that raced down a gorge at a height of two hundred and fifty meters. The Vajont Dam has repeatedly drawn me. There, on October 9, 1963, a catastrophe occurred that cost some 2,400 lives. At a height of 262 meters, the dam is one of the highest in the world. It seals a narrow gorge. In the enthusiasm for industry and technology that characterized Northern Italy in the fifties, they didn't want to hear about the evident risk attending such a project. On the south side of the reservoir, the slopes of Monte Toc were extremely steep and unstable. A geologist was alarmed, but he was removed, and a series of critical journalists were even put on trial by the Italian state on a charge of "undermining public order." As the reservoir filled, there were mudslides and rockfalls, and on October 8, 1963, trees on the steep bank lost their vertical orientation and inclined to the horizontal. A group of engineers was sent up to inspect. They disappeared, and no trace of them was ever found. Then, at 10:39 p.m., there was the greatest landslide recorded in the Alps since the Stone Age. Along an entire breadth of two kilometers, the flank of Monte Toc subsided into the reservoir that had attained very nearly its final height; some 260 million cubic meters of earth and rock fell into the lake at a velocity of 110 kmh. The tsunami wiped out the village on the opposite slope some 250 meters above the level of the reservoir. Fifty million cubic meters of water fired over the top of the dam, which had withstood the landslide, and came barreling down the gorge in an unimaginable flood. After a couple of kilometers, the tsunami crossed the Piave Valley and shot up the opposite slope to the small town of Longarone. Longarone was completely obliterated. There were very nearly two thousand dead. Many of the victims died from heart attacks because the water was so cold. An Italian Catholic newspaper wrote that this was a tribulation sent to us by God's love.

I want to write a film about the poet Quirinus Kuhlmann, whom I have already mentioned. He was a poet and a religious fanatic who in the second half of the seventeenth century crisscrossed Europe on foot, preaching and feuding with other mystics. He came from Silesia and wanted to start a new spiritual age, for which he, Kuhlmann, composed the so-called *Der Kühlsalter*. He occupied himself with alchemy, and because he took everything literally, he set off to look for the stone of wisdom armed with a shovel. Filled with his religious mission, he undertook the last crusade that we know of with two women, a mother and her half-grown daughter. He sailed to Constantinople to convert the sultan, but by the time they reached Genoa, the women had had enough of him, got together with a few sailors, and ran away with them. Kuhlmann very nearly drowned while swimming after the ship. He reached Constantinople, and in his attempt to get through to Sultan Mehmed IV, he was arrested and thrown in prison. He had intended to greet the sultan with these sentences: “For thou must fall by thine self, thou monster, dazed by God’s wisdom, not by shield or sword; in the name of the Lord God of Sabaoth: leap as thou willest, boil with rage, persecute. Thy downfall is at hand, thy time is done.” It is not known how he survived and got back his liberty. But from prison, we have his *Kühlsalm* 14, which begins:

*I cry to thee, three-person god  
Half dead with fear and misery  
And trepidation ringed!  
Jehovah, hear for Jesus’ sake!  
Show mercy and forgiveness  
Ere soul my body leaveth.*

He met his end in 1689 in Moscow, which he had reached on foot. He unleashed a religious furor that was probably misinterpreted as political. Kuhlmann died at the stake; his writings were burned with him.

I want to make a film with Mike Tyson about the early Frankish kings. He and I were introduced when a Hollywood producer wanted to make a

documentary about him. Production representatives were present with no fewer than five lawyers. Understandably, Tyson felt ill at ease, and I got him to go out on the balcony. When we spoke alone, as man to man, we straightaway hit it off. Instead of talking about the film, we talked about his childhood. He grew up in one small room with his mother. He was often present when there were gentlemen callers, and stole money from their empty trousers. By the age of twelve he had been arrested some forty times. When he reached the age of legal responsibility, he learned to box in juvenile detention and became the youngest heavyweight champion of the world there has ever been. Later, after being sentenced to six years in jail on a rape charge he vehemently denies, he began to read voraciously. He is conversant with the Roman Republic and the early Frankish dynasty of the Merovingians—Clovis, Chiladeric, Childebert, Fredegund—and the Carolingian Pepin the Short. After the end of his fighting career, Tyson had quickly squandered three hundred million dollars and was sitting on a huge pile of debt; hence, I suppose, his financial demands of the production company were so exorbitant that nothing could come of the film. As a boxer, he was terrifying, and after he had bitten off Evander Holyfield's ear, he was called the "baddest guy on the planet." In fact, though, Tyson is shy and boyish. He is soft-spoken and has a lisp. I urged Paul Holdengräber to have him to one of his public conversations at the New York Public Library. It was an unforgettable evening, with six hundred and fifty intellectuals, academics, authors, and philosophers in attendance. Paul, whom I had tipped off, opened by asking the audience whether any of them had ever heard of Pepin the Short. No one had a clue even though Pepin was the first Carolingian, a son of Charles Martel, and the father of Charlemagne. Mike Tyson then spoke about him and the beginnings of modern Europe.

I want to make a feature film about the twins Freda and Greta Chaplin. In 1981 they had a short run in the British "red tops," or tabloid newspapers, and were famous for a few weeks for being the "sex-crazed twins" who were so infatuated with their neighbor, a lorry driver, that he took them to court and had a restraining order taken out against them. Their story is unique. They are the only identical twins we know of who speak

synchronously. We know that twins sometimes develop their own secret language when they are all alone by which they can exclude the rest of the world, but Freda and Greta spoke *the same words at the same time*. I have had the experience where they open the door, greet me, and ask me inside, all completely synchronous in word and gesture. I suppose this type of a conversation could be a ritual developed by practice. But later on, they answered questions they can't have been expecting absolutely in unison. Sometimes they spoke separately, then Freda, for the sake of argument, would speak the first half of a sentence, at which point Greta would chime in with a word or two in unison, and then bring the sentence to a conclusion herself. Or the other way around. They wore exactly the same clothes, hairstyles, shoes. Their handbags and umbrellas were identical; they were as coordinated as a Rorschach test ready to be folded in two at any moment. When they walked, they didn't walk in step like soldiers, left-right, left-right, but they had their inside feet together and kept time with their outside feet. It was the same with their handbags, which they didn't both carry in their left hands; they carried them in their outer hands and their umbrellas with their inside hands. You could have folded a picture of them, and the two halves would have matched. Their gestures were synchronized, their physical awareness of each other continuous. Who was left and who was right in sitting or walking was for me the only way of telling which one was Greta and which was Freda at our early meetings.

For everyday matters, they needed help from social services. For instance, they were unable to open a can of sardines because that was something that couldn't be done with four hands. They got in a tangle, screaming in a hysterical frenzy. Vacuuming was just as problematic. They would go through the room side by side with all four hands on handle and tube, but when the two worn upholstered chairs were too close together and they couldn't both push through the gap, they would get stuck and suffer a nervous breakdown. Some other things, like brewing and pouring tea, had been settled and were resolved in clear and unchanging rituals.

They had grown up in Yorkshire, and to go by their statements, it seems likely that their tyrannical father had an incestuous relationship with them

both. Presumably that was a reason for them to withdraw and begin a sexual relationship with their neighbor, the lorry driver. They would meet him in the garden shed that was on the line between their two properties. For several years, according to their statements, that went satisfactorily until the man one day declared that he wanted to get married and the secret meetings would have to stop. The twins couldn't stand this. They ambushed their former lover and bombarded him—synchronously—with obscenities. They threw themselves in the way of his truck. They pulled the driver down from his cab and beat him—synchronously—with their handbags. In court the presiding judge allowed them to make their statements simultaneously. Any attempt to have them separately in the witness stand would have driven them wild. They spoke in a chorus, gesticulated synchronously, and in their agitation, they cried out in parallel with their index fingers jabbing the air in the direction of their accuser: "He's lying; don't you hear he's lying; the bucking fastard is lying!" They had both simultaneously made the same slip, "bucking fastard" for "fucking bastard." *Bucking Fastard* will be the name of my film. The accuser won his case, and the twins were given a suspended sentence of one month and told to keep their distance from the truck driver. Exposed to the pitiless British gutter press, they were finally taken in by a retired textile engineer who let them his attic. But their tragedy was not yet over. Downstairs there was a small business whose proprietor was all of a sudden interested in them. At night he clambered up onto a roof alongside their apartment to watch them undress. He fell one night, and the first time I visited the twins, he had both legs in casts. A trainee in the same firm, a punk, had intercepted one of the sisters, Freda, on her way from the yard up to the attic, wrestled her to the ground, and cut off her plaits, probably to make her identifiable. Whereupon her sister Greta had cut off her own.

Because they lived out of public view, the only way I was able to track them down was via a newspaper photograph of the building they were living in. A street sign in the background was legible, a crossing of two streets; and I saw the name of the firm, a perfectly ordinary name that filled two pages of the London phone book, but combined with the street name, it

allowed me to find the right address. The internet as such didn't really exist yet. The twins replied to a letter from me, and from the first moments, we had a profound connection. Because they almost never went anywhere, I asked them to a restaurant, but that seemed to freak them out. Maybe fish and chips then? I had seen a chippie around the corner from their house. That seemed to suit them better, but they still dithered a while in unison. "All right, we'll go there," announced Greta, who seemed to have the role of foreign secretary while Freda was more the home secretary. Greta normally began their letters; she wrote the first couple of lines, then immediately after, Freda wrote the same lines all over again. Later on in the letter, there would be big spaces between words; Greta would begin a line with her right hand at the left edge of the sheet and Freda wrote at the same time with her left hand from the right edge, not backward but word for word into the middle of the page. The two parts of the line would meet in the middle and form a continuous sentence. As we were going out, they said that I should wait a moment while they got themselves ready. They didn't come back down. Twenty minutes passed. After half an hour, I went to check up on them. The door to the bathroom was open, and I must describe what met my eyes. In front of the mirror, Greta was tying on her headscarf, and it must have taken ten seconds until her reflection did something unexpected, not synchronous: a hand reached out from the mirror and tucked a strand of hair under the headscarf. But there was no mirror; the twins were using each other as a reflection, standing facing each other and doing the same thing. After a series of meetings with them, I had to break off contact with them because there were unmistakable signs that I was on their emotional radar. Both have since died. Greta died of cancer, and Freda outlived her by thirteen years. Not a day passed that she didn't visit her sister's grave.

I will never catch up to myself. There is another unrealized film on someone who disappears, makes himself invisible. I have had long conversations with Kevin Mitnick, probably the greatest of all known hackers, who was long able to elude the FBI but finally was arrested and spent five years in federal prison. There is a film on the early Irish king

Sweeney, who in the midst of a great battle becomes lighter and lighter until he can fly, and finally settles in a tree and starts singing like a bird. No one can get him down. Only when he helps a monk pull a great turnip out of the ground does he finally die of exhaustion. The title of the film is *Sweeney Among the Nightingales*, a film for children. But this inability to keep up doesn't make me breathless; I acquiesce to it.

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## THE TRUTH OF THE OCEAN

In the labyrinth of memories, I often ask myself how much are they in flux, what mattered when, and how much has evaporated or changed tonality. How true are our memories? The question of truth has preoccupied me in all my films. Today it has even more urgency for all of us because we leave traces on the internet that take on a life of their own. The matter of fake news has achieved a huge prominence because it has so much effect on political life. But there have always been falsifications as long as we have had written signs. In reliefs, an Egyptian pharaoh celebrates his great victory over the Hittites, but we have a written account of the peace treaty that was concluded that tells us that the battle was indecisive. We have fake Neros who, after the death of the Roman emperor, suddenly turned up with great retinues in northern Greece and Asia Minor. We have the fronts of Potemkin villages that were to impress Catherine the Great on her journey down the Dnieper. It's an unending list.

From early on in my work, I was confronted by facts. You have to take them seriously because they have a normative force, but making purely factual films has never interested me. Truth does not necessarily have to agree with facts. Otherwise, the Manhattan phone book would be *The Book of Books*. Four million entries, all factually correct, all subject to confirmation. But that doesn't tell us anything about one of the dozens of James Millers in there. His number and address are indeed correct. But why does he cry into his pillow every night? It takes poetry; it takes the poetic imagination to make visible a deeper layer of truth. I coined the phrase

“ecstatic truth.” To explain that fully would take another book, so I’ll just sketch out a few lines of it here. It’s on this question that I have sought public conflict with the proponents of the so-called cinema vérité who claim for themselves the truth of the whole genre of documentary films. As the auteur of a film, you are not allowed to exist, or not more than a fly on the wall anyway. That creed would make the CCTV cameras in banks the ultimate form of filmmaking. But I don’t want to be a fly; I’d rather be a hornet. Cinema vérité was an idea from the 1960s; its representatives nowadays I call the “bookkeepers of the truth.” That got me furious attacks. My answer was “Happy New Year, losers.”

The French novelist André Gide once wrote: “I alter facts in such a way that they resemble truth more than reality.” Shakespeare observed similarly: “The most truthful poetry is the most feigning.” That busied me for a long time. The simplest instance is Michelangelo’s *Pietà* in St. Peter’s in Rome. The face of Jesus, just taken down from the cross, is the face of a thirty-three-year-old man, but the face of his mother is the face of a seventeen-year-old girl. Was Michelangelo lying to us? Did he wish to deceive us? Disseminate fake news? As an artist, he behaved perfectly straightforwardly by showing us the deepest truth of the two people. What the truth is is something none of us knows anyway, not even the philosophers or the mathematicians or the pope in Rome. I never see the truth as a fixed star on the horizon but always as an activity, a search, an approximation.

My film *Lessons of Darkness*, about the blazing oil wells in Kuwait at the end of the Gulf War, begins with a quotation from Pascal: “The collapse of the stellar universe will occur, like creation, in grandiose splendor.” The film isn’t a political piece about the crimes of Saddam Hussein’s retreating Iraqi troops; you could see and hear that in crude forms every night for a year on the TV news. I had in mind something different. When I arrived in Kuwait, it seemed to me that there was more going on: an event with cosmic dimensions, a crime against creation. During the entire film, which feels like a requiem, there isn’t a single shot in which we can even recognize our planet. The film comes on as a kind of science fiction apocalypse. Hence the Pascal before the opening scenes—I wanted to raise

the viewer to a high level and keep him there until the end. But the quote isn't from Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher who left us wonderful aphorisms about the universe; it's by me. I think Pascal couldn't have put it any better. And another thing: in such instances, I always pointed out that I made something up.

I am always fascinated by the way people apprehend the "truth." In the *Fitzcarraldo* shoots, the commune of the local Machiguenga tribe deep in the jungle wanted cash payment in return for their participation, but they wanted some other rewards too, such as a permanent medical outpost, a transport boat, and our support for their endeavor to get a title to their land, their territory. At first, we employed a surveyor to make a map with borderlines, then, with two representatives from Shivankoreni, we met the president of Peru, which led to an acceptance of their rights to their territory a couple of years later. Back then in Lima, there was a moment that for me became "the truth of the ocean." In the Machiguenga village, there had been a dispute as to whether there was such a thing as the ocean and if this ocean, if it existed, contained salt water. When we were traveling with them, the two Machiguenga representatives waded fully dressed out into the waves until the water went up to their armpits and tasted the water all around them. Then they filled a bottle with seawater, stoppered it up, and carefully carried it back with them to the jungle. Their proof was that if there was salt in one part of the sea, then, as with a large cauldron, all the water in it would be equally salty.

A very recent example makes me think. After I had shot *Family Romance, LLC* in Japan, Japanese television started to get interested in the phenomenon that nowadays, from an agency that employs some two thousand people, one can rent out a missing family member, say, or a friend for an afternoon. The founder of the agency, Yuichi Ishii, played the lead in my film. He is hired by the mother of an eleven-year-old girl to pretend to be the divorced father of the girl, who is anxious for contact with him. Because the parents split up when the girl was only two, she has no idea what her father looks like. Incidentally, the girl in my film isn't the actual daughter but a well-instructed nonprofessional actress. Yuichi Ishii was

interviewed by NHK television on his enterprise and asked to refer them to a client who had used the services of his agency. NHK then interviewed an elderly man who for one of his lonesome days had hired a “friend.” Straight after the show, the internet was deluged with people pointing out that the “customer” hadn’t been a customer at all, that Ishii had provided the station with an impostor, a cheat from his own agency, who had merely pretended to be a lonely man. The station apologized publicly to its viewers for not having done its homework properly. To lose face like that is the worst possible embarrassment in Japan. So far, so good. But now it gets interesting. I have what follows only on second hand. Yuichi Ishii defended himself with the argument that he had deliberately sent in an actor from his own agency because a true customer, a real old man in miserable solitude, would at most have spoken half the truth. A real customer, to save face and not give too much insight into his innermost being, would presumably have put a gloss on everything, would most likely have lied at least some of the time. But the “swindler” provided by Yuichi Ishii, the “cheat” who had played the part of the “friend” to lonely people hundreds of times, he knew exactly what was going on in the heart of the lonely person. It was only from the swindler that the real truth could be gleaned. And that doesn’t exist, and so I call it “ecstatic truth.”

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## HYPNOSIS

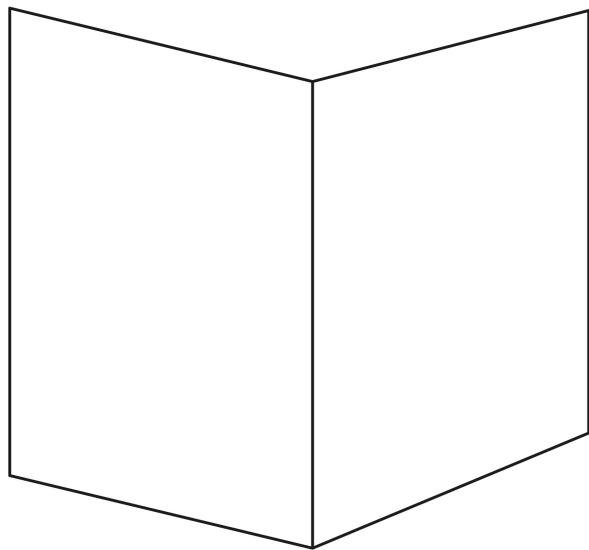
**A**fter I was first made to speak my own commentary in the film on the ski-jumper Steiner and appear in the film as the chronicler of his story, I came to see a good side of this task, which I had first resisted. There is something authentic and inimitable about speaking one's own words that any audience will immediately recognize and that no schooled actor or professional speaker can match. I found my way into this role without much forethought, but I didn't want to do it like an amateur either, so I strove for precision and effect. An additional factor was that in my feature film *Heart of Glass* I wasn't sure how I could show a whole village sleepwalking into a wholly predictable catastrophe. The film's subject is a real figure, a cowherd in the Bayerischer Wald in the late eighteenth century who had the gift of prophecy and, like Nostradamus, had visions of a world on fire and the end of mankind. The village lives by glassmaking, but the glassblowers have lost the secret of making ruby glass. Their search drives them all mad and culminates in arson and murder. The glass factory burns to the ground. How could I find a stylistic medium whereby all the actors seem to be in a trance? How do sleepwalkers walk and talk? I had the idea of possibly hypnotizing them all, but then first I would have to find out if people under hypnosis can open their eyes without waking and if two or more people under hypnosis are capable of talking to each other. I hired a professional hypnotist for tests and was very encouraged by the early results. Yes, people in deep hypnosis can indeed open their eyes without waking; and, yes, they can communicate with each

other as well. But then the hypnotist started getting on my nerves. He gave himself airs and claimed that he, with his special gifts, could draw down and deflect upon others a cosmic aura. The condition of hypnosis was something he could produce by focusing his own inner vibrations. He was technically good at his job, but when people come up with this kind of New Agey twaddle, I get irked. I took on the role of the hypnotist myself; I had studied enough and made myself familiar with the literature. The self-important New Ager later founded an institute where he specialized in hypnotizing young women and dispatching them to ancient Egypt as temple dancers. They then spoke what he claimed was the language of the pharaohs, but Egyptologists listened to their babble and confirmed that it was just meaningless sounds and had nothing to do with any known language. In fact, anyone can hypnotize. The cause of the mystifications is that we know very little about the mechanics of the brain switching off in hypnosis and sleep. All we really know is that we have to proceed methodically. There are simple techniques, fixing the eyes of the subject, say, with the point of a pencil. That is accompanied by a certain intense and suggestive way of speaking. In my later film voice-overs and commentaries, I was to draw on this way of speaking.

There are certain preconditions for hypnosis. The subject must have given his or her consent and be willing to follow the prompts. If someone isn't especially imaginative and mentally flexible enough to follow suggestions, hypnosis becomes very difficult if not impossible. Very old people, rigid in their thinking, are difficult to hypnotize. Small children, four-year-olds, say, full of energy and with limited attention spans, are similarly not easy to hypnotize—and probably one shouldn't try to anyway. One has no authority over hypnotized persons. Murdering under hypnosis happens only in bad films and novels because the basis of our nature isn't affected. If you give a hypnotized subject a knife and tell them to kill their mother, they will simply refuse. Subjects remain capable of lying. Hence the law doesn't accept evidence provided under hypnosis. Also important is that returning the subject to normal consciousness must be done slowly so they reenter the world free of fear and with joyful expectancy. But I too was

in for some surprises. One musician was a little unsure when he answered a newspaper ad and turned up for a test. All the invitees knew they had come for a test, that I was putting together a group of actors, so the young man asked me if he could bring his girlfriend. I put her at the back of the room as an observer and told her not to follow my vocal prompts. But after a few minutes, she was the first to lapse into hypnosis. There was an incident during the filming as well: one of the actors felt so relaxed in his condition that he refused to follow my instructions and come around step by step. I needed a very long time to wake him. In my film *Invincible*, decades later, the pianist Anna Gourari, who was playing the female lead alongside the strongest man in the world, expressed strong doubts that she could be hypnotized on camera. We had a few witnesses, and a short time later she was in such a deep trance that it took me a long time to wake her.

There is a primitive sketch that tells me if a person is “gifted” for hypnosis. Just as there are people who can learn very quickly to ride a bike, say, so there is a basic adeptness for hypnosis.



You have in front of you an open book. Is the book facedown so you see its cover? Or is the book open facing you? In the event that you see the book as facing you, I take away the sketch for a moment, then produce it

again and suggest seeing it with the book facedown. If you find it easy to rethink the picture and see it differently, then you are a good candidate for hypnosis. The same goes, of course, if you saw the book as facedown. Can you see it face toward you?

Later, I experimented with films that showed to subjects I had hypnotized. One viewer, for instance, felt able to circle the main figure in *Aguirre* like a helicopter while the landscapes became purely imaginary. I was interested how such visions were produced; we know so little about the processes of dreams and visions. But the risks of working with large groups of hypnotized individuals are too great, and the responsibility is too great because in rare cases there may be psychotic reactions.

But there is at least a memory of my role as hypnotist in the timbre of my voice in documentaries. What matters, though, is not the voice itself but what the voice has to say. It is the content that spooks the audience. What I write and record could never appear, say, in a National Geographic film. At the end of my film on volcanoes, *Into the Inferno*, you see the streams of lava erupting from the interior of the earth, and my voice reminds the listener that deep under our feet there is glowing magma “that wants to burst forth and it could not care less about what we are doing up here. This boiling mass is just monumentally indifferent to scurrying roaches, retarded reptiles, and vapid humans alike.” Sentences like that demand the appropriate intonation. I accept then that my voice in German has the South German twang of my first language, Bavarian. And I accept too that I speak English with a strong accent, maybe not quite so strong as Henry Kissinger’s English but still sufficiently so for there to be a number of imitators on the Web who in “my” voice read fairy tales or give advice for living. There are dozens of imitators, but none of them has really caught my sound. My voice has found a great community of fans, which combined with my view of life asks to be imitated. I am a grateful victim of such satirists.

## VILLAINS

Very early, after my first few films, I was asked to stand in front of the camera as an actor. The first offer came from Edgar Reitz, one of the founding members of the New German Cinema, who had also supported me personally. Early on, he and Alexander Kluge, who ran a kind of film school in Ulm, had invited me there; I guess they both felt convinced that whatever it was, I had it. I turned them down. I was always an autodidact; I never believed in colleges. But both directors gave me valuable tips for my own productions, and what really mattered then was getting a stream of collaborators from them. I got Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus, who for a long time was my editor. Beate has an extraordinary affinity for film; she knew instinctively, almost reflexively, what we would find useful. She was rough, even pitiless, in the way she treated me. On my first film, *Signs of Life*, we were going to look at a six-hundred-yard reel of material, but it turned out that it was back to front. She inserted the roll anyway and looked at everything in reverse at five times the speed. When the roll had rattled through, she took all twelve minutes out and threw it in the trash. "All bad," she said laconically. Only after my repeated insistence that we look at the roll once through in the correct order and maybe make up a short sequence out of it did she agree to do so. She told me the material would be thrown away anyway, and another three weeks later, I saw that she had been completely right. This time I threw out the roll myself. Beate thought all my films were so bad that she refused to go to any of the premieres, including Aguirre's. She allowed one exception, *Even Dwarfs*

*Started Small*, which she thought was great, and she took a bow at the premiere. Later, Harmony Korine and David Lynch would rank the film near the top of their favorites.

At that time, everything was on celluloid. Analog sound was recorded and then transferred on wide awkward tapes that, like film tapes, had perforated edges by which sound and picture could be synchronized. Edgar Reitz owned a sound machine about the size of a gym locker and allowed me to use it for free in his production suite. At that time, the late sixties, he was making a series of short films, *Stories of the Dumpster Kid*, for which he got me to play a crazy murderer. I performed fairly creditably, and from then on, no end of madman and villain parts came my way. But there were some exceptions too. Edgar Reitz cowrote a multipart series of films for television called *Heimat*, which were set across the whole twentieth century and about village life in an agricultural area called the Hunsrück in Rhine-Palatinate, where he came from. At the end, he wrote a film called *Home from Home*, about emigrants from the impoverished village in the nineteenth century. For that, he asked me to play the visiting scientist Alexander von Humboldt, and I accepted provided that he appear in at least one scene with me. Reitz agreed and played a peasant holding a scythe on the edge of a field, whom Humboldt asks for directions. Reitz spoke in the regional dialect of the Hunsrück, which was practically incomprehensible to me. But I wanted the scene because that closed a circle of four decades for the pair of us.

In 1989 I played in Peter Fleischmann's film *Hard to Be a God*, a science fiction film based on a famous novel by the Strugatsky brothers. I played a fanatical, prophetic preacher who is soon removed by the ambitious powers that be. I die when struck from behind by a spear. A stuntman thrust the spear into a plank of wood attached to my back, but he seemed to be a bit tentative about it. Both Fleischmann and I thought that it didn't look like anything much, and I asked my murderer to show a bit more enthusiasm. What I didn't know about him was that he had been a champion Soviet middleweight boxer. The next time, the jolt he gave me knocked out two crowns from my molars. We filmed in Kyiv, in Ukraine, in

a vast studio from the golden age of Soviet cinema and on location in Tajikistan in the foothills of the Pamirs. My work on that film is one of my few direct contributions to New German Cinema. I don't feel I fit into that category. My films were always something else.

Technically, my very first appearance is at the beginning of *Signs of Life*, where the wounded lead, Stroszek, is taken out of an army truck and tended to in a village. The extra I had engaged didn't show, and in the emergency and because it didn't fit anyone else, I pulled on the uniform. Today I am amazed to see myself as little more than a schoolboy. Much later, I played myself in a 2004 film by Zak Penn, *Incident at Loch Ness*. I play myself as a director who is forced by an unscrupulous producer, played by Zak Penn, to compromise—at gunpoint if need be. The gun is just a signal flare pistol, not really useful even to threaten someone with, but the whole thing seems so authentic that a large part of the audience thought it was real and was on my side even though it should have been clear from the opening minutes that the whole thing is a set-up. What I did in the film was 100 percent self-irony. Moments like that have always been good for me. But because the general sense of context has been lost—what is satire, what is make-believe, and what isn't—a good part of the viewership didn't realize that everything they were seeing was scripted and directed. The film is an early take on what dominates the media today by way of fake news.

In 2008 I was in another one of Zak Penn's films, which he wrote this time and directed, *The Grand*. The scene is a casino in Las Vegas during a poker tournament where I play "the German" who cheats and is finally slung out of the tournament. "The German" is a pathetic character who takes his pet rabbit with him everywhere while at the same time wanting to strangle other small animals in their cages to remind himself how alive he is. Let me say—for the record—that there is no part of my character that might prompt a writer to create such a part for me. It's pure invention on Zak's part and hence pure performance on mine.

Before I worked with Zak Penn, who was interested in me because he loved my films, Harmony Korine had approached me. We had met at the festival in Telluride, where he was showing his film *Gummo*, which I was

impressed with because here was a new voice in American cinema. He was disturbed by my films, especially the one with the dwarfs. His father, also a filmmaker, had taken him to see it when he was a teenager, and my film had left a lasting impression on Harmony. Later, he described it in an interview like this: “Suddenly I saw that there could be poetry in film, which I had never seen before as powerful.” For Harmony, I was a sort of model or avatar of his own films, and I agreed to play in his 1999 *Julien Donkey-Boy*, especially because he was playing the part of my crazed son in the film, and I was his father, the epicenter of a profoundly dysfunctional family. The older son, played by Harmony, kills someone in a fit of madness after possibly impregnating his own sister, played by Chloë Sevigny. The younger son is a loser, and the grandmother who lives with them in the same house is completely gaga. When I got to the location in Queens, though, Harmony had handed over his part to another actor and was only directing. Perhaps that had always been his plan, or maybe he lost his nerve. He didn’t work with scripts, just loosely defined dramatic situations. I had to come up with my lines on the spot, as I saw on the first filming day. At the supper table, my elder son reads me a poem he’s written, and I’m to crush him in front of his siblings in the most obnoxious way. The scene was taped by several video cameras at once. I had just sat down at the table, and I could already see the record lights flashing on the cameras, and I turned to Harmony, who was lurking in the background somewhere. “What do I say? What’s my line?” But Harmony just replied: “Talk!” There was nothing for it but to talk. I outdid myself in my villainy, which produced Harmony from his hiding place. He stood behind one camera almost in my eyeline, and I could somehow register that he was wildly enthusiastic, and I thought to myself, *I’ll ham it up some more*, and following my inspiration, I tell my son at the table that real poetry isn’t stupid and “artsy-fartsy” like the thing he’d just read me, but it has to be as grand as Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry*. In the showdown at the end of that film, Harry is shooting it out with the worst of the villains. The villain staggers backward and lies on the ground, his revolver pointing up at Harry standing over him. Has he shot off all his bullets, or is there one left? Harry says something amazing to him:

“You’ve got to ask yourself one question: Do I feel lucky?” The villain pulls the trigger, but the chamber clicks on empty. And Harry shoots him dead. Harmony must have been so thrilled with my performance that he whooped, and that wrecked the sound take, and the scene ends immediately. In film theory classes—which I can’t stand—the passage is written up as though Harmony and I had conceived of the scene as a profound statement on film history; in fact, it was made up on the spur of the moment purely from necessity.

I had imagined Harmony Korine’s style to be purely guerrilla, but being in his production showed me some of the things that hold the film industry in a viselike grip. The team, all of them young and enthusiastic people who wanted to be part of something radically new, fled in terror when a picture was taken off the wall and a dozen or so cockroaches beetled off from behind it. They were only prepared to go back to work when the production came up with hazmat suits for everyone that looked like the kind of thing you’d wear to clean up a radioactive site. Whereupon Harmony and his cameraman ostentatiously took off almost all their clothes and went on working in their Speedos. Harmony told me he bought them for this occasion. Another thing struck me: in the relatively small space of the house, there were any number of phones and walkie-talkies; team members who were standing practically next to each other would only communicate through their phones. When I came back to the living room after a two-minute visit to the fridge upstairs and could be seen by anyone going down, I could hear my whereabouts being radioed out—and the echo was audible on all the other electronics—“He’s on the stairs,” then another three steps, and “He’s back on site.” In kissing scenes in big Hollywood productions, they make you have an “intimacy consultant” onsite while a mob of seventy people, mostly just standing around, are talking on their walkie-talkies.

In 2007 I made *Mr. Lonely* with Harmony Korine on an island off the Atlantic coast of Panama. I play a fanatical missionary who as a pilot, with the help of Catholic nuns, drops aid packages for the starving Indigenous communities. One of the sisters accidentally falls out of the plane but survives because her faith helps her descend gently to earth. Other sisters

follow suit to test their own faith, and one leaves the bay of the plane on her bicycle and carries on cycling after her gentle landing. When the crew filmed one last scene on the airfield without me at the end of the day and I was still in my costume, I noticed a man. Behind the tall wire fence of the small provisional airport building, among the handful of people waiting for the arrival of a short-distance flight, I saw a youngish man I'd first noticed some hours previously. He was Black and held a very small and very withered bunch of flowers. He looked deeply sad. I was eager to have a conversation with him, and he asked me if I could take confession from him even without having taken a vow because I was, after all, wearing a priest's robes. I asked him back; this seemed so grave; perhaps he would like to confess to our camera. He liked the idea. I called Harmony and the camera crew over. All I said to Harmony was "Are you ready?" Neither of us had the least idea what would happen next. The camera was turned on. I took the man's confession. He told me that his wife and three small children had run away from him, and for two years, he had reported to the airport every day in the hope that they might be on the next plane. He claimed not to know what had made his wife run away, and I told him that this was his opportunity to salve his conscience before the world. He was still evasive. "Were you unchaste with another woman?" I asked him directly, which he denied. "My son, you were unchaste with at least five other women." Then all at once, he looked completely relieved and confessed: "Yes, father, I was." I gave him absolution and blessed him. After we'd shot everything, he told me that it might only have been a film but it was much better than being in a confessional with an actual priest.

On occasions, my contributions were pretty minor. I had little cameo appearances long before the films with Penn and Korine—for instance, in two films of Paul Cox's in Australia in the mid-eighties, one of them, *Man of Flowers*, where I again play a father of a sort one would sooner not have. In 1996 I played a small part in a film by the Austrian director Peter Patzak called *Brennendes Herz*, though I have nothing to say about the film because I've never seen it. I am often asked about two documentaries by Wim Wenders that I appear in, *Room 666* and *Tokyo-Ga*, but I haven't seen

them either. My one clear memory of *Brennendes Herz* is this. The scene is sometime at the end of the Second World War. I am in a basement with a general. As we speak, a bomb lands nearby and causes the whole room to shake. Next to the general is a large wall mirror that gets a crack. Some special effects people had lined up a little explosion behind the mirror, and I was curious about what it would look like while the general was talking to me. So I offered to sit right next to the camera so I could stay in his eyeline. I wasn't in the picture, but I was the length of a table away from him, and I was watching the mirror a yard or so farther back. Something in me told me to look away. There was a mighty bang, and more than a hundred tiny shards of glass the size of grains of rice but individually sharpened hit me on the side of the head. They had used way too much explosive. It took them more than an hour to pick the glass out of my scalp with tweezers. If I hadn't looked away, I would have been blinded.

My kind of dark humor was appreciated earlier in the States than elsewhere. So it came as no surprise to me in 2002 when Matt Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons*, reached out to me to ask if I'd be interested in taking on a guest role in the series. To begin with, I wasn't sure. I thought I'd seen printed versions of *The Simpsons* as a comic strip in newspapers, but it turns out that I was wrong; there was no printed version. But I had never seen them as animated cartoons on TV either. Matt Groening guffawed down the phone at me and said that *The Simpsons* had been famous for twenty years now. He thought I was kidding him when I asked him to let me see one of the newish episodes on DVD so I could hear the cartoon voices and practice my own version. But all he wanted was my own natural voice in English; that would create mirth enough. He may not have said that directly, but that's what I took him to be saying.

At that time, I was asking myself more or less directly what I was doing in popular culture anyway, though at the same time I had the sense of myself as somehow mainstream. I couldn't really separate the two categories. Rock musicians, skateboarders, and professional soccer players have always been drawn to me. Still, I asked myself what possessed the distinguished physicist Stephen Hawking to appear in an episode of *The*

*Simpsons*. When I finally looked the show up, though, *The Simpsons* was so wild and anarchic that I felt a certain kinship. There was some speculation that I did it for the money, but you don't make much working for *The Simpsons*, the rate is in the lowest bracket of the Screen Actors Guild scale; you make what you'd make as a small-part actor for any TV show. What persuaded me was the huge enthusiasm of the entire *Simpsons* crew for my films, so I agreed to do it. I spoke the guest part of Walter Hottenhoffer in "The Scorpion's Tale," then later on, I voiced a crackpot called Dr. Lund, and, just recently, a third part. What also interested me was the methodical preparation on such a series. The writing team invited me to one of their sessions where the balls went whizzing back and forth, wild and chaotic and creative. I'd never seen anything like it. Then there was a test run for the script, which impressed me. All the players are assembled for a so-called table reading to test the effectiveness of the story line and the gags. In a big room around the speakers at the table are about a hundred carefully chosen individuals who are the test audience. They are chosen for age, sex, social status, level of education, ethnicity—everything is considered. But then something else happened that astonished me. Before we actors read from our scripts, a comedian came on for an hour and told jokes. Not until the audience had been thoroughly warmed up did we get to start reading, with everything stopped and measured down to the fraction of a second: how long until the first laugh, how strong the laughter, how long it goes on for, how quickly the next line has to come. I asked about the role of the comedian. He is hired because the audience tuning in at home is primed to be amused, whereas the test audience, among strangers in a strange studio, will be far too restrained.

It's a purely joyful experience for me to feel I've done really well. In *The Simpsons* studio, everything is technical; it's only after the scripts have been recorded that the figures are drawn with their movements. But sometimes details are changed later, then during a rerecording you can see little loops of your character as in a post-synchronization. Normally, the sound recorder and director sit in a control room by themselves, but the director insisted on being in with me. Even before I had finished saying my line, he laughed

aloud in the middle of the recording, which, of course, then had to be done again. Still, I felt emboldened to give it another twist, and he laughed again, even louder, into my recording. He was banished to the control room, but I knew I had done a good job.

I have never applied for any part. I never submitted myself to an audition. Nor was it any different when the director Christopher McQuarrie and his star, Tom Cruise, turned to me. They wanted me to play the villain in the first Jack Reacher film. That was in 2011; the film was premiered in 2012. Before I agreed, I looked closely at the screenplay and found it more intelligent than those of run-of-the-mill action movies. The part of Zec was a challenge to me. Of course, there was a whole row of villains, and they all lashed out with their fists and stomped about and opened fire on one another indiscriminately with their disagreeably large assault rifles. But I don't carry a gun in the film. I have lost most of my fingers in a Russian gulag, and I'm blind in one eye. All I have to inspire terror with is my own quiet voice. There is one scene where I'm giving friendly instructions to a subvillain to make up for his dangerous mistake by eating his own fingers, just as I did to escape forced labor in a deadly Siberian lead mine. Of course, he is unable to, and he is shot without compunction. I noticed during the filming how the members of the crew doubled over with nausea and how, later on during the cutting, the scene was softened not once but twice to make it palatable to a younger audience. It's normal for the film industry to do that when it's a question of open violence, nudity, or swearing. But in that scene, I still remained so revolting, even in the final version, that my wife got a call after the premiere from one of her woman friends in Paris: "Lena, I can't believe you're actually married to that man. You know, we're only a short flight away. We have a guest room; you'll be safe with us."

Tom Cruise was extremely respectful to me. For my part, I was impressed by his absolute professionalism. He was always thoroughly prepared, physically at peak fitness, alert. Among his vast entourage he had a dietician, who every two hours gave him a tiny scrupulously balanced meal. I jokingly asked if he had a shrink for his dogs there as well. No one

else dared ask him that kind of question, and he seemed happy that there was someone on set who wasn't rigid with awe. I had a similarly chummy relationship with Jack Nicholson some years earlier when he was interested in *Fitzcarraldo*. He invited me out to his place on Mulholland Drive sometimes, and we watched telecasts of Lakers away games. Once he and his then-partner, the actress Anjelica Huston, lay stretched out on their bed to watch. I was at the foot of the bed, tired after a long flight, and Jack finally had to nudge me awake to point out that the basketball game was over. He needed his bed for something else now. I was sprawled across his feet, and he gave me his best shit-eating grin. Marlon Brando had a place right next door then; he wanted to meet me. The tall iron fence slid up silently, but inside there were warning signs everywhere to keep car windows shut and not to get out until someone had taken away the dogs. I saw four ferocious German shepherds who seemed like they would stop at nothing. They would have set upon any incautious visitor. With Brando, who had expected me to turn up with some film project, I talked about books and his island in the South Seas. He was grateful that I was a rare visitor who hadn't wanted something from him the way all the rest did.

The director Jon Favreau invited me to play in the Star Wars offshoot *The Mandalorian*. He is a great admirer of my films, and he offered to acquaint me with the Star Wars world a little when I confessed that I hadn't seen any of the films. He showed me some costumes, trial storyboards, and models of remote planets that were extremely impressive. In the series, a new technology would be used with round horizons that would obviate the need for green screens that all previous fantasy and science fiction films required. All around them, the actors see the planet on which they are moving or the spaceship that is carrying them, and the camera sees the whole thing. You no longer have to pretend to be under dragon attack while standing in front of a green screen. The cinema is back to where it always was and where it belongs.

The amount of secrecy around *The Mandalorian* was extraordinary. In order to lay false trails, I was contracted for a Huckleberry Finn movie. While filming, you were not allowed to leave the studio, not even for lunch,

unless you covered your costume completely with a long tunic. A security man at the gate checked you out. Fans were lurking outside who had somehow got onto the lot to sneak some pictures on their smartphones. The awareness of these films and the expectations of a worldwide community is astonishing. When the veil of secrecy was finally lifted at the premiere, I muttered something about the mechanical Baby Yoda, and within an hour, there were ten million comments about it on the internet. The downside of one's participation in these things is that it draws attention away from my real work, my own books and films. In the media, there were reports that I had used my fee (not that much, not even on a Star Wars series) to finance my feature film, *Family Romance, LLC*, but that film was shot and edited before I ever embarked on that little digression.

Among the villains in my films, Klaus Kinski figured from the start. He had a screen presence to match anyone in film history. Michael Shannon is another such actor, and Nicolas Cage also is. He thinks that *Bad Lieutenant* is his most extraordinary performance, even ahead of *Leaving Las Vegas*, for which he won an Oscar. I agree with him. But of all the great actors and actresses I have worked with, one stands out: Bruno S. His appearance was always rough, as though he slept under bridges even though he had an apartment, but his face and his imposing speech gave him an unconditional dignity. He was like an outcast, someone reeling toward you in confusion from a long bad night into a worse garish day. He had a depth, a tragedy, and an honesty that I have never seen anywhere else in cinema. Bruno himself didn't want his full name used for either our *Kaspar Hauser* film or for *Stroszek*; he didn't want to be a star but more something like the unknown soldier of cinema. It was as Bruno S. that he had figured in police reports when he committed offenses as a juvenile. His childhood and youth were calamitous, full of tragedy. His mother, a Berlin prostitute who didn't want him, beat him from earliest youth, and when he was three or four, he was beaten so badly that he lost the ability to speak. She then delivered him to a home for mentally infirm children, where he didn't belong. From his ninth year, he tried to run away. There followed years of increasingly brutal homes and institutions, then a series of petty crimes. He broke into a car in

winter to have somewhere to sleep, was arrested by the police, and spent four months in prison. No one knew what to do with him. He was transferred to a madhouse, but they put him out on the street as "cured." He was twenty-six. At the time I got to know him, he was driving a forklift in a Berlin steel factory and making a little money on the side from singing ballads in the backyards of tenements. Acting brought him fame and attention from colleagues and strangers alike, which did him a world of good. He published a book of his aphorisms, had an exhibition of his naive paintings in a gallery, released an album of his songs. In so doing, he started to use his full name, and so will I here: his name is Bruno Schleinstein. He died some years ago. The cinema will never look upon his like again.

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## THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD INTO MUSIC

I fell into the world of opera much as I fell into acting. It wasn't simply the consequence of my film *Fitzcarraldo*, which was about introducing grand opera to the jungle, it was more to do with the use of music in all my films. In my films, music is never merely background; it's what makes the images into even starker visions. In 1985 the director of the Teatro Comunale in Bologna wanted to get me for a production of *Doktor Faust* by Ferruccio Busoni. The opera was left a fragment because the composer died before he could finish the score, and the libretto is utterly chaotic; the whole piece tends to be viewed as unperformable. My brother Lucki, though, encouraged me and he had a wise agent, Walter Beloch, on his side. Together they were able to talk me into taking a look at the opera house in Bologna. I was impressed by the technical resources backstage. At first, only a few technicians escorted me on our tour, but I noticed that there were more and more of them all the time, lighting electricians, stagehands, ushers. By the time I had finished my inspection, I found myself ringed by some thirty people who refused to budge. One of them stepped forward and said that he had been spontaneously made their spokesman. They wanted me there; they wanted to work with me. Then, in one short sentence, he said that they wouldn't let me go home unless I signed a contract right away. I was moved, took the spokesman as witness, and in the director's office, I signed my contract of employment.

Although I can barely read music, I felt completely assured in this new job from the very get-go. I went to see a production at La Scala in Milan, the first I had ever been to; I had no idea what operas were supposed to look like or what the recent trends were. Because I was so unversed in the world of opera, my own production looked unlike anything else you could see being put on. My piece was to begin with Doctor Faust, who has lost himself in his studies; and for that, I asked my set designer, Henning von Gierke, to construct a cliff face soaring up into the sky against some low-lying clouds. Henning was originally a painter, but he's worked on a number of my films and created wonderful backdrops for *Nosferatu* and *Fitzcarraldo* and others. My Doctor Faust has lost his way in the rocks and can't go forward or back. I wanted to leave the curtain open for the overture and, in the middle of the music, have a stagehand falling into the deep from the flies. He tumbles into the clouds at the foot of the stage. I wanted the orchestra to hesitate. Can we believe our eyes? Did we just see something? An accident? Where did he fall to? On the fog-covered stage, I wanted a hole to be made for the unlucky person to vanish into. The management thought the whole thing too risky and a stuntman too expensive, so I volunteered to do it myself, at least for the first night. I did tests and had myself gradually raised higher and higher. We had got hold of a big inflatable cushion of the kind they use on film sets. There are several photographs of me in free fall, but I called it a day when I landed on the air cushion from a height of forty feet and sprained my neck. This was just foolish, and I didn't need persuading to end the folly. At the end of the opera, everything is transformed: instead of the Savior, it is beautiful Helen on the cross on Golgotha, and Mephistopheles is the good shepherd walking onto the stage with a newborn lamb over his shoulders. (It was lambing time just then.) Mephistopheles leaves the lamb to itself, and since the music was never finished, the orchestra sounds gradually fall away until, for the last nine minutes, only one single stringed instrument is playing. The lamb looking for its mother is wandering around the stage then stops. It baas into the audience.

The production, like all my others, was led by the music. I understood that when the whole world is transformed into music the result is opera. And I also understood that the heightened emotional world of opera is absolutely *sui generis*; it doesn't exist in human life or in nature. Feelings in opera are compressed and intensified, but for the audience they are real because the power of the music makes them so. Feelings in grand opera are like principles of feelings, like axioms in mathematics, incapable of further reduction, concentration, explanation.

Wolfgang Wagner, a grandson of Richard, having seen my production in Bologna, insistently invited me to direct *Lohengrin* at the opening of the Wagner festival in Bayreuth in 1987, but I declined immediately. I was a filmmaker. After many vain attempts to change my mind, Wagner finally sent me his favorite recording of the opera on a cassette. I didn't know the piece. The overture hit me like a thunderbolt. I was driving on the freeway to Austria and had to pull over to listen. I had never heard anything as beautiful. I called Wolfgang Wagner and said, "I'll do it; it's such wonderful music, let me try." Paul Frey, a Canadian, relatively new to the operatic stage, was contracted to sing the lead. His family are Mennonites from Ontario. From his parents' farm, he had driven truckloads of piglets the length and breadth of Canada. He had sung along to Elvis, and later, when someone gave him a record of the opera singer Mario Lanza, he sang along to his arias as well. Frey's voice was strikingly clear and beautiful, and he had appeared in musicals. I visited a performance of *Lohengrin* in the Badisches Staatstheater in Karlsruhe, where Frey was singing. Wolfgang Wagner had sent me there as a scout. At Lohengrin's first appearance, there was a calamity. Directly behind Frey the thirty-foot backdrop collapsed, but he sang on unfazed while the audience shrieked in alarm. It turned out that Paul Frey couldn't read music either; he learned his parts from records. He was my man. He went on to have a great career in Bayreuth and at the Met in New York.

My Bayreuth production looked different as well. The second act, for instance, begins with the sea, with waves breaking toward the auditorium. There were at least sixty tons of water on the stage that were rhythmically

raised and lowered by hydraulics. The effect, strange to say, had never been attempted before. The water then needed to be got rid of very quickly, in the space of minutes, but like a bathtub being emptied, this can be a noisy process. The stage technicians found a very simple solution to the problem, and the audience couldn't understand where the sea had disappeared to. As the director, I was almost never at a desk in the auditorium during rehearsals but onstage—a uniquely privileged position. In the great choral passages, for instance, I would be in the midst of the singers to supervise the timing. Half the singers in the Bayreuth choir could be soloists, that's how good they are, and to be in the midst of all those voices and be transported by them is an indescribable feeling. I was incredibly fortunate. I have worked with the world's best.

I have directed operas by Verdi, Bellini, Wagner, Mozart, and Beethoven. To spend a limited period of time working with music, breathing music, transforming a world into music, always had the effect of grounding me. Opera, though, needs a distinct approach. The world in opera is artificial, the dramas are artificial, the intrigues are artificial, the scandals too. Everything is, in fact, pretty safe—the music has been written, the buildings are solid and well-roofed; unlike when you're filming in the jungle, there's no chance of a storm catching you out. All the orchestra players know the score by heart, the singers too. But unless there's some mysterious sense of imminent calamity and intrigue, the whole thing can become lifeless. Your production is dead. I assume that the constant expectation of scandal is born out of the deep fears of the singers who are suddenly pushed out onto the stage and have to hit exactly the right notes with split-second timing. There is no second chance, and the audience, only dimly visible in the half-light, is a last vestige of the old gladiatorial arenas. They want to see blood. I have been at La Scala and heard the best baritone in the world mercilessly booed in mid-aria because he had mild problems with his voice. "Stronzo, cretino! Why aren't you working as a waiter?" Then, after the interval, once he'd got himself back, he was hailed to the rafters. Luciano Pavarotti was humiliated and never sang there again; Maria Callas too, after a similar incident, never again.

During rehearsals, I got in the habit of creating some animation or disturbance when it seemed to me that everything was going too smoothly —without the spark, the fire, of whispering, scandal, danger. In 1996 in Washington, DC, I directed *Il Guarany*, with Placido Domingo. He wanted me to direct this almost unknown opera by a nineteenth-century Brazilian composer. The rehearsals went smoothly; everyone sang the right notes, but it somehow hadn't clicked. I decided to start a false rumor on Placido Domingo's day off. I casually asked someone in the administration if she had informed the cast that Placido wouldn't make the day of the premiere because he had an engagement at the Met. It only took a few minutes for the house to go wild; the singers were gossiping, and suddenly there was music again. Without these artificial dramas, the premiere and subsequent performances won't work. The underlying fear needs to be dispelled by such adrenaline-producing events.

At the dress rehearsal of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in Palermo, there was a bomb threat, and the theater had to be vacated. (This time, it wasn't my doing.) The production was almost completely immaterial because there is almost no plot in *Tannhäuser*, only souls in commotion. There was almost no set. All the effects were the product of light and air, which was moved by carefully adjusted ventilators. I matched that with extremely light costumes made from a special parachute silk and designed by my friend, the wonderful costume designer Franz Blumauer, so they fluttered at the least puff of wind, like souls made visible. In dramatic moments, ventilators concealed in some thirty places were turned up, and the great veils fluttered in deep disturbance. I still remember how, after the theater had been cleared, all the singers and the Venus, who had a large red veil blowing about her, wandered around the completely deserted streets of Palermo. On its caterpillar treads, a police robot climbed up the red-carpeted steps to the theater; there was an extraordinary surrealism about. I noticed that clumps of confused souls squeezed together outside of bars, peeping in, then I remembered that there was a big World Cup soccer match involving Italy. Everyone wanted to see it, and I assume a choral singer set off the alarm. The premiere, two days later, went without a hitch.

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## ON READING MINDS

The question of the transference of thoughts has long preoccupied me, not just through the twins with their simultaneous speech; and it's not by chance that I'm currently engaged on a documentary film on the "reading" of brain activity. It's possible by now, with the help of electromagnetic waves emitted by the brain, to transfer the human will to a robot. I have seen a paraplegic woman, merely by willpower, steer a mechanical arm to pick up a glass of water and a straw, and lift them to her mouth. By using magnetic resonance imaging, we can follow brain activity so minutely that we can tell if someone is reading a text in English or Spanish. It's possible to take a person's mere imagining of two elephants crossing the savanna from left to right, and turn it, by a computer scanning the brain waves, into an admittedly somewhat blurred image. By graphically transcribing complex brain activity, it's possible to be fairly sure if someone is lying or not much more accurately than by using a lie detector, which only responds to physical signals: pulse, blood pressure, and breathing frequency. It's perfectly right that such polygraphs are not admitted in evidence in court, but such is the rapid pace of change in the scrutiny of brain activity that the autonomy and inviolability of our thoughts will soon need some legal definition and protection. There is already a draft agreement of the rights of the individual to the inviolability of thought, just as there is an international agreement banning certain chemical and biological weapons. Chile is the first nation to have adopted this in an appendix to its constitution. This no doubt goes back to the abuse of human

rights that took place under the dictatorship of General Pinochet. I have been given leave to record the deliberations of committees of senators and parliamentarians on the subject via Zoom.

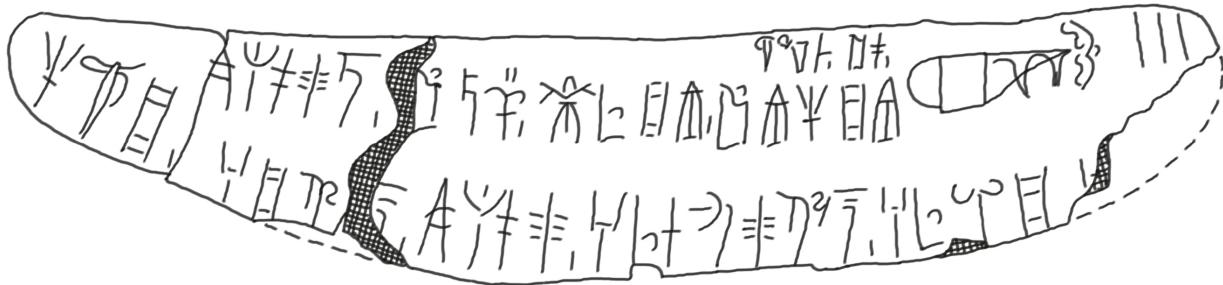
I have visited a temporary holding pen for nuclear materials in New Mexico, where radioactive barrels are stored in vast salt mines. The project is overwhelmingly disapproved of by the locals even though the mines are deep underground and have experienced no geological change for 250 million years. The question is: How do we warn future generations not to enter the mine? In the space of a few thousand years, no one will speak or understand our languages in their present form. It's even possible that all our languages will be gone. Of the 6,500 languages currently in existence, we lose one every ten to fourteen days—and almost always the loss is not even recorded. This is a deeply alarming rate of extinction, much faster than the loss of mammals, whales, snow leopards, or other vertebrates like frogs. So how can we generate a warning sign about the radioactive poison that will be generally comprehensible to human societies in the future? There was a competition in which all the cartoonlike pictorial ideas proceeded from the certain assumption that future peoples with future cultural backgrounds will be able to "read" such pictures. As long ago as my 1969 film, *The Flying Doctors of East Africa*, in a sequence on a campaign of preventive medicine in Uganda, I showed how the inhabitants of a remote village were perplexed by the posters that were used. They had neither newspapers nor books nor television. Grown curious, I asked what they saw on the public health poster of an oversize eye, and the answers varied from a rising sun to a big fish even though the previous image had been used to demonstrate how to protect the eye from infection. I finally hung up four of the images used in the teaching campaign side by side, with one deliberately hung upside down. I asked individuals to identify which picture was upside down, and barely a third could do so correctly. For them, the posters must have been a bewildering mishmash of colors, much as abstract paintings are to us. It was clear to me that it wasn't the villagers who were stupid so much as the medical helpers from the outside who could not imagine that pictures from our civilization were illegible to the villagers.

Why were young Maasai warriors, athletic young men, incapable of climbing four steps up to a mobile clinic that contained a small lab and an X-ray machine? They shuffle around full of shame, as though walking on eggs. It was to do with taboos and barriers that the doctors didn't understand any more than I did.

How the pictures of the distant future are to be formed has always preoccupied me. Even if we must imagine a future without a script, without any understanding of historical connections, I can envisage a scale of forty thousand years, which is as far as the distance from the Chauvet Cave to the present. Books will have disappeared; the internet and constellations will have changed; the Big Dipper will be much more elongated. For the nuclear dump in New Mexico, someone had the idea of turning the cacti cobalt blue through genetic mutation as a kind of warning of nuclear threat, but it's just as likely that they would have spread right across North and South America or perhaps gone extinct altogether from climate change.

Reading signs, reading the other team's tactics in soccer, reading the world, all that never let go of me. It is a theme in *Kaspar Hauser*, where the young protagonist is projected into the world, as if from a distant planet, without any understanding of houses, trees, the clouds in the sky; without language, without understanding the people around him. In the case of the deaf and blind characters in *Land of Silence and Darkness*, I was moved by the way they perceived the world, and the neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks got in touch with me for that reason. He found the film so fascinating that he bought a 16 mm copy and repeatedly showed it to his students. Early on, I read his book *Awakenings*, where he describes patients who, as a consequence of a type of encephalitis, spent forty years in unconsciousness and were suddenly woken by a new drug into a world where another world war had taken place and airplanes transported vast numbers of people, a world where there was television and the Bomb. I had questions I wanted to ask him regarding sleep and hypnosis. He was familiar with my film *Heart of Glass* and the hypnosis scenes in it. I had no one else I could talk to about the deciphering of Linear B.

Linear B is a Bronze Age script that was used on baked clay tablets on the island of Crete and on the Greek mainland in Pylos and Mycenae. Here is an example of it from the 1956 book *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* by Michael Ventris and John Chadwick.



To me, the deciphering of Linear B is one of our greatest cultural and intellectual achievements bar none. At first, no one knew what language the signs were in, but there are instances of words or configurations of signs with varying endings that suggested an Indo-European language. We can sound out Etruscan with its Latin-like alphabet even though we don't know the language. Presumably, Etruscan is a non-Indo-European language that we will never be able to understand unless some Rosetta Stone falls into our laps. Linear B has more than seventy different signs, which suggests a syllabic script. Additionally, there are some ideograms, the picture of a jug for "jug" or of a cart with wheels for "cart." Number signs in a decimal system were rapidly identified. Two questions remained to be answered: What were the sounds made by the different syllabic signs, and what language were the tablets written in? Together, Michael Ventris, an architect and classicist who worked on cracking German Luftwaffe codes during World War Two, used logical grids that grew more complete all the time, and John Chadwick, a classicist and expert in early Ancient Greek dialects, came to the compelling conclusion that it must be an archaic form of Ancient Greek that was perhaps current some seven or eight hundred years before Homer.

Unfortunately, it transpired that the texts were nothing like Homer or Sophocles, not poems at all, but bookkeeping and inventories—who owed

how much corn and olive oil to whom and when, what a person's contribution to a religious festival was, who owed what to which agricultural laborer. Not everything was completely translated and understood, and the earlier Linear A has so far withstood all our efforts to decipher it, presumably because it goes back to a different language that we can't identify and possibly never will know. My grandfather Rudolf, Michael Ventris, John Chadwick, Oliver Sacks, and, in a lesser way, I, as a gawping bystander, might have made a good team in some fantasy world of magical desires. The Phaistos Disc, a burned clay disc also from Crete, with its spiral inscriptions that exist nowhere else except in a few tiny fragments, is the greatest riddle of all. For me, it's the emblem of our limitations in reading the world, our mysterious world. Various charlatans claim to have cracked it, but even the biggest supercomputers of the future will never be able to decipher these markings. If someone comes along and declares he has deciphered it, then we may be absolutely certain that he's a crook. Or a madman.



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## SLOW READER, LONG SLEEPER

don't see the things that fascinate me as esoteric. They are all bound up with fundamental questions about our identity; the twins would be one example that runs counter to our assumption that all individuals are unique. The reading of the world, the reading of signs like Linear B, is only seemingly exclusive because it's so restricted. What does my average day look like? Who are my friends? What sort of life do I lead? I have trouble describing myself because I have a vexed relationship with mirrors. I look in the mirror when I shave so I don't cut myself, but that shows me my jawline, not my person. To this day, I couldn't tell you what color my eyes are. Introspection, navel-gazing, is not my thing. But some daily things are known to me and I could name them. Like Freda and Greta, I have an uncompromising spatial sense vis-à-vis other people. I notice that especially when I have many people looking at me. In public events, I can speak and argue clearly only when the person I am speaking with is on my right. If he or she were on my left, I would continually feel as if I were craning my neck. It's the same in the cinema. If I'm seeing a film with someone, they have to be right of me, otherwise watching something on screen together would be a torment. I see best when I'm placed slightly left of center, at a slight rightward angle, in other words. Admittedly, I don't go to the cinema much, no more than three or four times a year.

I live in Los Angeles. Lena and I had to decide where we would live in the United States, and the answer was clear right away—in the city with the most substance. LA is associated with the glitz and glamour of Hollywood,

but it's in LA that the internet was born, and all the big painters are no longer in New York but here, same with the writers, the musicians, the mathematicians. The number of Mexicans has greatly enlivened writing and music. Electric cars are being designed here; reusable rockets are built on the southern outskirts of the city. The mission control center for a number of space enterprises is just north of Los Angeles in Pasadena. A lot of banal phenomena are from here as well: aerobic studios, inline skating, weird sects. I could go on.

Los Angeles has its dark sides too. Once, while I was being interviewed by the BBC, I was shot at and slightly wounded in front of the camera. To me, it felt like a bit of local folklore. A few days later, I rescued Joaquin Phoenix, who had happened to crash on the highway right in front of me, from his upside-down car. I think he was in withdrawal and presumably shouldn't have been driving. Hanging upside down between fully inflated airbags, he refused to hand me the lighter he was trying to light his cigarette with. He didn't notice that there was gas leaking everywhere. I never mentioned it, and only when Joaquin reported it in the media did I confirm it.

I'm a slow reader because I often depart from the text in front of me to picture scenes and situations and only then return to the words on the page. There are some books, like Thomas Bernhard's *Walking*, that took me two weeks to get past the first paragraph. The opening lines of that book are so stupendous that I never got over my amazement. I can really only read lying down. Presumably that's to do with the way that when I was growing up with my mother and brothers there was never space at the table for me to read, but there was lots of room on the floor with my head on a cushion. I work briskly, without endless retakes. My shooting days are usually over by 3 or 4 p.m., even though I could go on until 6 p.m. I can't remember ever doing overtime. I deeply dislike night shoots because I'm not a night owl. I write my screenplays once I can see the entire film in front of me, and I've rarely taken more than a week to complete one. I don't need silence or special conditions; I can write on a crowded bus or surrounded by noisy children in a playground. The screenplay as a literary form has always been

important to me. My screenplay for *Cobra Verde* begins in the heat and drought of the *sertão* in Brazil: “*The light garish, lethal; the sky without birds; the dogs lie vanquished by heat. Demented with anger, metallic insects sting glowing stones.*” It’s not your traditional filmscript.

I like to sleep in whenever I can. I have no dreams. Some people may tell you that everyone dreams for so and so many hours and minutes per night, but I’m living proof to the contrary. No matter how I’m woken up, I wasn’t dreaming. I dream maybe once a year, then always banally, that I had a sandwich for lunch, for instance. I do have daydreams when I’m hiking. I walk entire novels sometimes but never go off course. Sometimes, when I wake up, I feel bad that I didn’t dream, and maybe that’s why I compensate by making films. When I was growing up, I had some wild episodes of sleepwalking. I was in a big army tent stuffed with cots because the youth hostel was overcrowded, and I shook my brother Till awake, telling him that he needed to pole the barge on the Neusiedler See. He then shook me back so hard that I awoke. It was pitch-dark, and I was still up to my chest in my sleeping bag, bopping around aimlessly because I didn’t know where my sleeping place was. I woke up the sleepers by banging into their beds. Sometimes I had similar episodes in later life as well. I have never taken drugs. The culture of drugs has always repelled me. I also believe they wouldn’t have done me any good; there’s so much turmoil inside me anyway.

I avoid contact with fans. Occasionally, I watch trash TV because I think the poet shouldn’t avert his eyes. I want to know what others aspire to. I’m a good but limited cook. My steaks are excellent, but they’ll never touch what you can get on any street corner in Argentina. Tree huggers are suspicious to me. Yoga classes for five-year-olds—which in California are a thing—are suspicious to me. I don’t use social media. If you see my profile anywhere there, you can be sure it’s a fake. I don’t use a smartphone. I never quite trust the media, so I get a truer picture of the political situation by going to multiple sources—the Western media, Al Jazeera, Russian TV, and occasionally by downloading the whole of a politician’s speech. I trust the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which is one of mankind’s greatest cultural

achievements. I mean the one in twenty massive volumes with six hundred thousand entries and more than three million quotations culled from all over the English-speaking world and over a thousand years. I reckon thousands of researchers and amateur helpers spent 150 years combing through everything recorded. For me, it is the book of books, the one I would take to a desert island. It is inexhaustible, a miracle. The first time I visited Oliver Sacks on Wards Island northeast of Manhattan, I had mislaid the house number but knew the name of the little street. It was evening, wintertime; the slightly sloping street was icy. I parked and tiptoed along the icy pavement looking into every lit-up home. None of the windows had curtains. Through one window I saw a man sprawled on a sofa with one of the hefty volumes of the *OED* propped on his chest. I knew that had to be him, and so it was. Our first subject was the dictionary; for him as well, it was the book of books.

There is perhaps only one other candidate when it comes to the desert island: the *Florentine Codex* in the English translation by Arthur Anderson and Charles Dibble. When the Spanish invaders laid waste to the Aztec Empire, there was one single man who tried to rescue as much as he could of the dying civilization. His name was Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan monk. He ordered that everything known about the history, religion, agriculture, medicine, and education of the Aztecs was to be collected. The texts were in Nahuatl but were assembled in bilingual form, with one column in the original and one in Spanish translation. I was allowed to take the codex in my hands in the Laurentian Library in Florence and record a few pages of it for my film *The Lord and the Loden*. The English translators, Anderson and Dibble, were two wonderful scholars at the University of Utah. Utah is a center of research into pre-Hispanic culture because the Mormons believe the Aztecs are one of the lost tribes of Israel. Their text has the force and power of the King James Bible. At that time, I had an unfinanceable project on the conquest of Mexico seen from the point of view of the Aztecs, and for that, I had studied the basics of classical Nahuatl with a grammar book and a dictionary. I went on a pilgrimage to Salt Lake City to see Charles Dibble, who was then eighty-

four and retired. Professor Anderson had already died. Dibble, who was a wonderful, quiet, profound gentleman, was surprised to have been sought out by a German filmmaker who was in awe of his work. The *Florentine Codex* appeared in a bilingual Nahuatl and English edition of twelve volumes from the University of Utah Press after thirty years of work. In the course of our one long day together, we became friends, though we never saw each other again. Charles Dibble died shortly after our meeting.

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## FRIENDS

I have few friends. You could probably classify me as a loner. It's hard to stay in touch with people because we live so far apart: Wolfgang von Ungern-Sternberg in Regensburg, Joe Koechlin in Lima, Uli Bergfelder in Italy and Berlin. Over many years and many films, Uli did the designs for me; he helped work on the superstructure of the ship in *Fitzcarraldo* and was often an advance scout—in Australia, for instance, for *Where the Green Ants Dream*. On location, he could always fix anything with an expert touch. Sometimes he traveled for me, to the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan, for instance, where ships are rusting away in the desert that was once the seabed. We had considered it as a possible location for *Salt and Fire* (2016), but on getting his report, I threw out the idea and filmed instead in the Uyuni salt flats in Bolivia. Uli is a specialist in Provençal poetry, but his home is an old farm estate near Volterra, where he has some nine hundred olive trees. He restored a crumbling ruin of a farmhouse over many years. Being with him was always lovely and strife free. You can see him in a cameo role in *Nosferatu*. When the ghost ship from the Black Sea makes landfall in Wismar full of innumerable rats, he is the sailor who frees the dead captain who has lashed himself to the wheel with ropes.

Also among my friends, I count Herb Golder and Tom Luddy, the film editor Joe Bini, the cameraman Peter Zeitlinger and his wife, Silvia, my fellow directors Terrence Malick, Joshua Oppenheimer, and Ramin Bahrani, all far away, and Angelo Garro, a little closer in San Francisco. Angelo is a blacksmith from Sicily who set up his own forge in San Francisco, but

above all, he's a figure from another epoch—he is a hunter and gatherer; he makes his own wine, his own olive oil, his own pasta, prosciutto, and sausages. Once or twice a year, he will shoot a wild boar and roast it on coals in his forge. He makes his own spiced salt and Sicilian sauces following his grandmother's recipes. I made a short film with him for a Kickstarter campaign that became very successful. Every important American cook has been to see him in his forge, and I don't know any of them who don't revere him. With him, everything is good and proper and essential.

Also in the circle of my close friends is Werner Janoud. Because he and I share the same first name, he now goes by Janoud. He grew up dirt-poor in the Vogtland in the former German Democratic Republic without his father, who had disappeared in Stalingrad, and Janoud worked as a tungsten miner from the age of fourteen. Conditions were brutally hard, and when he was nineteen, he tried to flee to the West. He was taken off the S-Bahn heading for West Berlin, having made himself suspicious by carrying all his papers with him. They took his passport away. A couple of days later, he succeeded in fleeing, this time with his twin brother's passport. In Cologne he worked in a steel-rolling mill and in a jam factory on the side. But he wanted to get out into the world. Before long, he had saved enough money to buy himself a bicycle and passage on a ship to Montreal. He had a friend with him, but the friend went home after a few days. Janoud bicycled across the North American continent to the Pacific. On the way, he worked as a farmhand and taught himself English from conversations. He wasn't an analphabet, he could read well, but he has difficulty writing to this day. He then headed south all alone through the United States, Mexico, and Central America, where he learned Spanish and started taking photographs. His pictures from that time have a striking depth, and because he wasn't aware of any trends, they have an expressiveness that is all their own. After three and a half years on the road, he laid up in Lima, where he worked as a photographer for local papers. I got to meet him through the soccer manager Rudi Gutendorf, who had trained five teams in the early days of the Bundesliga, then became a globe-trotter working with various national sides

all over the world. When I happened to be in Lima for the preparations for *Aguirre*, I would take part in the fitness training of his team Sporting Cristal Lima. One day when the A team was up against the B team, they were a player short, and Gutendorf wrote me down for the B team. What position did I want to play? I said I didn't care, but I wanted to be up against Alberto Gallardo. Gallardo was the Peruvian international winger who was chosen by journalists for a World Eleven alongside Pelé and other greats following the 1970 World Cup held in Mexico. Gallardo was a speed freak, a madman who did crazy things on the pitch, who never did what you expected. I wanted to make things hard for him at least, to get in his way, so I frantically tried following him around. After ten minutes, someone passed the ball to me, and by that stage, I could no longer remember which team's shirts were mine and which way we were playing, and after fifteen minutes I slunk off the pitch with stomach cramps and vomited for hours into the oleander bushes beside the pitch. Janoud pulled me out of the shrubbery, and from that moment, we were friends. In *Aguirre*, you can see him on the raft spinning around and around in the rapids until Aguirre destroys it with a cannon. Janoud is completely primal and self-made, the only person I know who is absolutely and totally not deformed by human society.

Janoud was also involved in *Fitzcarraldo*. While the team was away filming somewhere else, he and a girlfriend stayed in the jungle camp to keep the locals from demolishing it for building materials. First time around, he impressed Mick Jagger because his experience had been so unlike anyone else's, and hence his perspective on life was unique as well. He hadn't heard of the Rolling Stones. He repeatedly asked Mick what his name was, and Mick patiently tried to correct him. "It's not Nick. It's M as in 'mother.' Mick." But Janoud could never get it right; he said: "Oh, right, Nick, as in 'pain in the nick.'" Then Janoud would bray with laughter like a donkey and Mick Jagger would chime in, also like a donkey. Janoud asked if Nick actually made money from his singing and would he mind plucking him some tune on his guitar. Mick did so without hesitation with his electric guitar and amp, just for Janoud. Later, Janoud left Peru for Munich. Before I moved to America, he lived with me in a rented house in Pasing near

Munich. He was a wonderful companion to my little son Rudolph. Years later, to mark Rudolph's coming of age, the three of us went to Alaska and had a little seaplane set us down on a lake west of a chain of mountains. We didn't have a tent and built ourselves a shelter. We had an axe, a saw, hammocks, a rubber dinghy, and fishing rods. We had brought some basic provisions with us—rice, noodles, onions, salt, tea—because the nearest habitation was four hundred kilometers away. We wouldn't have starved, but we had to find our own berries, mushrooms, and fish. At the end of six weeks, the plane came to pick us up. It was such an extraordinary experience, we did it again on a different lake the following year. When I directed Bellini's *Norma* in 1994 in the Verona Arena, Janoud came to visit. His Peruvian girlfriend was working in Bologna at the time, and he went from there to see me. For a few days, he seemed a bit down and introverted, and I finally asked him what the matter was. It turned out that his girlfriend was pregnant, and Janoud thought that this was a terrible misfortune. It was morning, and we were in a café together right by the arena. I waved the waiter over and ordered a bottle of champagne. How wonderful; he would be a father; there could be no better news—I congratulated him, and we drank to it, and all at once, Janoud was very excited by the prospect. He married Rosa, his girlfriend, and Gretel their daughter is now grown up and independent.

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## MY OLD MOTHER

In the last six years of her life, my mother learned Turkish because she had a woman friend in Munich who came from eastern Turkey. My mother visited her there, traveling by herself in rattletrap buses in Eastern Anatolia with live sheep among the passengers. Her health slowly declined over many years. At the very end, I had to go to the United States because the producer Dino De Laurentiis planned a big film project with me. I told my mother: "I won't go. I'm staying here." She replied: "You should go; you have to go. Life needs to live." I flew to New York, and as soon as I got there, I learned that she had died overnight. I spent time with my friend Amos Vogel, who canceled everything he had planned that day. He sat the whole day with me in silence and prayer. That night I flew back.

## THE END OF IMAGES

I try to imagine the world without books like this one. For decades now, people have stopped reading; even university students no longer read.

This development is the result of tweets and texts and short videos.

What will a world be like with hardly any spoken languages, which are becoming extinct in their profusion and variety? What will a world be like without a profound language of pictures, where my profession no longer exists? The end is coming. I picture a radical turning away from thought, argument, and image, not just an approaching darkness in which certain objects can still be felt, but a condition where they no longer exist at all, a darkness filled with fear, with imaginary monsters. I think of a passage in the *Florentine Codex* written as though its speakers, amid the destruction of their culture and horizons, were still trying to find their way to their language: “A cave is terrifying, a place of terror, a place of death. It will be called a place of death, because people will die here. It is a place of darkness, dark, always dark. It stands there with mouth gaping open.” How could one depict the absence of images? Not just their removal, the final irrevocable turning away from images, but their nonexistence? I imagine two mirrors set up in exact opposition reflecting nothing but each other into infinity. But with nothing for them to mirror. If the mirrors were one-way mirrors, like the kind the detectives use for interrogations, then you would see a void reflected in the mirror opposite. No criminal confessing, no table, no chair, no lamp, just space containing nothing that is reflected over and over again. Nothing else, no living, no breathing. No Frenchman eating his

bicycle. No second Frenchman switching into reverse and driving his ancient car backward through the Sahara. No truth, no lie. No river called the river of lies, Yuyapichis, the deceiving river that pretends to be the much larger Pichis River. No Japanese marriage agency ordering a bucketful of sand to be emptied out of a satellite so the bride can be astonished by a shower of meteorites. No more twins living in separate bodies but thinking and speaking in unison. No parrots from Alexander von Humboldt's 1802 journey up the Orinoco, where he came to a village, all of whose inhabitants had been killed off by a plague. Their language had died with them, but the neighboring village had for the past forty years continued to look after their parrot. This parrot still spoke sixty distinct words of the inhabitants of the dead village, their dead language. Humboldt copied them down in his notebook. What if we taught those words to two parrots, and the two could converse in them? What if we project ourselves far into the future and imagine things that we've created, that still exist, not forever but for two hundred thousand years, let's say. A time when humanity will almost certainly have died out but certain of our monuments might still exist, indestructible. The dam in the Vajont gorge that withstood the vast landslide of 250 million cubic meters of rocks and earth and gravel. At its foot, this dam is twenty-eight meters thick and poured from specially hardened concrete. This lower part would still almost certainly be there, standing majestically without relaying any message, no message for anyone. There at the foot of the smooth concrete wall there would be a crystal clear trickle of water from the rocks to the side; it would be sought out by herds of deer, as though

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While I can, I'd like to shout out to the Romanist Elisabeth Edl. She had nothing to do with the present book but her wonderful German translations of Flaubert reconnected me to my native language, which I'd hardly spoken for many years.

I thank Michael Krüger. It was he who implacably first got me to write. My early books, published by Hanser, would probably never have existed without him. I'd also like to thank Drenka Willen for her sage counsels, especially on translations into other languages.

Thanks also and above all to my wife, Lena. She inspired me to write this account, for which, one-sided as it is, I alone take responsibility.

Los Angeles, July 2021

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# FILMS

1961: *HERAKLES*

Short. A bodybuilder is confronted with the deeds of the mythic Heracles.

1964: *GAME IN THE SAND*

Short. Never released.

1966: *THE UNPRECEDENTED DEFENCE OF THE FORTRESS DEUTSCHKREUTZ*

Short. The absurd defense of a fortress against a nonexistent enemy.

1967: *LAST WORDS*

Short. The last inhabitant of a lepers' colony is forcibly returned to civilization. He refuses to speak.

1968: *SIGNS OF LIFE*

Feature. A German soldier wounded in the Second World War becomes deranged and bombards friend and foe with fireworks.

1969: *PRECAUTIONS AGAINST FANATICS*

Short. A pensioner feels compelled to protect racehorses against fanatics.

1969: *THE FLYING DOCTORS OF EAST AFRICA*

Documentary. Doctors bring medical assistance to remote places in East Africa.

1970: *EVEN DWARFS STARTED SMALL*

Feature. A rebellion of little people causes devastation in a penal colony.

1970: *FATA MORGANA*

Uncategorizable. Poetic requiem for a planet that dissolves into mirages.

1971: *HANDICAPPED FUTURE*

Documentary. The dreams of severely handicapped children.

1971: *LAND OF SILENCE AND DARKNESS*

Documentary. The world of the deaf and blind Fini Straubinger, who looks after other deaf and blind people.

1972: *AGUIRRE, THE WRATH OF GOD*

Feature. Lope de Aguirre leads a band of Spanish conquistadors who disappear without a trace in the Amazon jungle while looking for the fabled El Dorado. A story of power and madness.

1973: *THE GREAT ECSTASY OF WOODCARVER STEINER*

Documentary. The young woodcarver Walter Steiner is such an outstanding ski jumper that he all but flies to his death at the world championships in Planica. A film about ecstasy and death.

1974: *THE ENIGMA OF KASPAR HAUSER A.K.A. EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF AND GOD AGAINST ALL*

Feature. The foundling Kaspar Hauser is put out in Nuremberg. He has no knowledge of the world, language, other human beings. The tragic murder of a unique historical figure.

1976: *HEART OF GLASS*

Feature. The eighteenth-century shepherd Mühlhiasl sees visions of the end of the world. Villagers sleepwalk to their foretold doom. All the characters acted under hypnosis.

1976: *NO ONE WILL PLAY WITH ME*

Short. A lonely boy and his speaking raven.

1976: *HOW MUCH WOOD WOULD A WOODCHUCK CHUCK*

Documentary. The world championship of livestock auctioneers in Pennsylvania. On the limits of language, the last poetry of capitalism.

1976: *STROSZEK*

Feature. On his release from prison, Stroszek dreams of a new life in America. He sets off for Wisconsin with the prostitute Eva and an old man. A ballad.

1977: *LA SOUFRIÈRE*

Documentary. The wait for the coming volcanic eruption. Only one poor peasant refuses to be evacuated.

1979: *NOSFERATU THE VAMPYRE*

Feature. Count Dracula is on his way to Wismar with ten thousand rats. The love of a woman is enough to destroy him.

1979: *WOYZECK*

Feature. After Büchner's play. In a fit of madness, the poor maltreated Woyzeck murders his beloved.

1980: *GOD'S ANGRY MAN*

Documentary. The TV evangelist Dr. Gene Scott threatens to take his station off the air unless he receives a certain sum of money from his flock in minutes.

1980: *HUIE'S SERMON*

Documentary. In front of his congregation, Bishop Huie Rogers preaches and rocks himself into a religious frenzy.

1982: *FITZCARRALDO*

Feature. Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald dreams of grand opera in the jungle. To exploit an otherwise inaccessible rubber-growing area, he has hundreds of Indigenous people haul a large steamship over a mountain.

1984: *WHERE THE GREEN ANTS DREAM*

Feature. Australian Aboriginal peoples try to save the sacred place of the green ants from the bulldozers of a mining company.

1984/1985: *BALLAD OF THE LITTLE SOLDIER*

Documentary. With child soldiers in the war zone between Honduras and Nicaragua.

1985: *THE DARK GLOW OF THE MOUNTAINS*

Documentary. The mountaineers Reinhold Messner and Hans Kammerlander scale Gasherbrum I and II, two eight-thousand-meter peaks in the Karakoram Range.

1987: *COBRA VERDE*

Feature. The Brazilian outlaw Manoel da Silva becomes the viceroy of Dahomey in West Africa. Based on the novel by Bruce Chatwin.

1988: *LES GALOIS*

Short. France, as seen by various directors. Part of the series *Les Français Vus Par . . .*

1989: *HERDSMEN OF THE SUN*

Documentary. Tribal meeting of the Wodaabe nomads in the southern Sahara. Women make their choice of the most beautiful young man.

1990: *ECHOES FROM A SOMBRE EMPIRE*

Documentary. General Jean-Bédel Bokassa has himself crowned emperor of the Central African Republic in a ceremony aping Napoleon's coronation.

1991: *SCREAM OF STONE*

Feature. Two mountaineers drive each other to death in a race to climb the most difficult peak in the world, Cerro Torre in Patagonia.

1991: *JAG MANDIR: THE ECCENTRIC PRIVATE THEATRE OF THE MAHARAJA OF UDAIPUR*

Documentary. The Austrian artist André Heller brings together the best magicians, dancers, and snake charmers of India for one great performance.

1991: *FILMSTUNDE (1-4)*

Four documentaries. Filmed during the Viennale in Vienna in a variety tent with guests.

1992: *LESSONS OF DARKNESS*

Documentary. An apocalyptic vision of our planet after Iraqi forces set fire to all the oil wells of Kuwait.

1993: *BELLS FROM THE DEEP*

Documentary. Faith and superstition in Russia. The lost city of Kitezh, where the drowned faithful ring the bells.

1994: *THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD INTO MUSIC*

Documentary. Filmed behind the scenes at the Wagner festival in Bayreuth.

1995: *GESUALDO: DEATH FOR FIVE VOICES*

Documentary. Ahead of his time, Carlo Gesualdo, the Prince of Venosa, composes music four centuries ago that deeply influenced Stravinsky.

1997: *LITTLE DIETER NEEDS TO FLY*

Documentary. All Dieter Dengler wants to do is fly, but this lands him in the Vietnam War. He is the only American who successfully escaped Pathet Lao captivity in Laos.

1999: *MY BEST FIEND*

Documentary. Years after Klaus Kinski's death, the author makes a film about their explosive collaboration over five films.

1999: *THE LORD AND THE LADEN*

Documentary. In Guatemala, the Mayas venerate a divinity clad like a wealthy ranchero.

2000: *WINGS OF HOPE*

Documentary. Juliane Koepcke is the sole survivor of a plane crash in the Peruvian jungle, which the author himself avoided only by a series of coincidences.

2001: *PILGRIMAGE*

Documentary. Believers in agony and ecstasy before the Holy Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico.

2001: *INVINCIBLE*

Feature. A Polish-Jewish blacksmith's apprentice is celebrated as the strongest man in the world in Berlin variety shows—to the displeasure of the Nazis. His family refuses to listen to his warnings of the impending danger.

2002: *TEN THOUSAND YEARS OLDER*

Documentary. Within the space of a few minutes, the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau tribe is thrust ten thousand years into the future with their first encounter with civilization.

2003: *WHEEL OF TIME*

Documentary. The Dalai Lama calls the Buddhist faithful to a ceremony in India. Half a million pilgrims follow his summons.

2004: *THE WHITE DIAMOND*

Documentary. Following a tragic accident with the maiden flight of his first airship, Graham Dorrington tests out a new prototype over the Guyana jungle.

2005: *GRIZZLY MAN*

Documentary. Timothy Treadwell tries to protect Alaska's bears from poachers. A tragic misunderstanding of savage nature costs him and his girlfriend their lives. Both are killed by grizzlies.

2005: *THE WILD BLUE YONDER*

Feature. A stranded extraterrestrial being winds up on Earth as a failure. He pines for his home planet.

2006: *RESCUE DAWN*

Feature. Growing up in postwar Germany, Dieter Dengler experiences a freakish fate as a prisoner of the Pathet Lao. He barely escapes through the jungle alive.

2007: *ENCOUNTERS AT THE END OF THE WORLD*

Documentary. Dreamers and scientists meet in the Antarctic. An ode to a continent and its brief inhabitants.

2009: *BAD LIEUTENANT: PORT OF CALL NEW ORLEANS*

Feature. New Orleans, ravaged by corruption, drugs, and a hurricane, is the ideal setting for a homicide detective. A story on the bliss of evil.

2009: *LA BOHÈME*

Short. Made in Africa for the opening of the London opera season with *La Bohème*.

2009: *MY SON, MY SON, WHAT HAVE YE DONE*

Feature. A gifted young actor goes mad during rehearsals for *Orestes*. He can no longer distinguish between play and reality, and murders his own mother with a stage prop, a Turkish saber.

2010: *CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS*

Documentary. Filmed in the recently discovered Chauvet Cave. The wall paintings there, made some thirty thousand years ago, are extremely well-preserved and fascinatingly modern.

2010: *HAPPY PEOPLE: A YEAR IN THE TAIGA*

Documentary. A newly created film from Dmitry Vasyukov's four-hour epic on fur hunters in the Siberian taiga.

2011: *ODE TO THE DAWN OF MAN*

Short. The Dutch cellist Ernst Reijseger enters another world as he plays.

2011: *INTO THE ABYSS: A TALE OF DEATH, A TALE OF LIFE*

Documentary. Michael Perry on death row in Texas a week before his execution. On a crime of stupefying nihilism.

2012/2013: *ON DEATH ROW*

Eight documentaries on human abysses. Filmed in death row prisons in Florida and Texas.

2013: *FROM ONE SECOND TO THE NEXT*

Documentary. Tragedies when drivers text while driving.

2015: *QUEEN OF THE DESERT*

Feature. The writer and archaeologist Gertrude Bell is largely responsible for the political shape of the Near East following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

2016: *LO AND BEHOLD: REVERIES OF THE CONNECTED WORLD*

Documentary. The internet from its early beginnings to its current excesses.

2016: *SALT AND FIRE*

Feature. A female biologist is kidnapped and left alone in a salt flat with two blind boys.

2016: *INTO THE INFERNO*

Documentary. Around the world with the volcanologist Clive Oppenheimer. Spectacular footage of erupting volcanoes and their effect on human civilization.

2018: *MEETING GORBACHEV*

Documentary. With André Singer. The life and politics of the last Soviet president in conversation with the author.

2019: *FAMILY ROMANCE, LLC*

Feature. In Japanese. An agency actor plays the part of the father to an eleven-year-old girl who has been seeking one.

2019: *NOMAD: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF BRUCE CHATWIN*

Documentary. Encounters with the great British writer from the point of view of the author.

2020: *FIREBALL: VISITORS FROM DARKER WORLDS*

Documentary. Around the world with Clive Oppenheimer to see great meteor impacts. Their effect on life and civilization.

2021: *THEATER OF THOUGHT*

Documentary. Scientists work to solve the deepest riddles of the brain, human thought, and illusions.

2022: *THE FIRE WITHIN: REQUIEM FOR KATIA AND MAURICE KRAFFT*

Resists classification. Requiem for the French volcanologists Katia and Maurice Krafft. Their apocalyptic visions and early deaths while filming a volcanic eruption in Japan.

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# OPERA PRODUCTIONS

1986: *DOKTOR FAUST* (BUSONI)

Teatro Comunale, Bologna

1987: *LOHENGRIN* (WAGNER)

Richard Wagner festival, Bayreuth

1989: *GIOVANNA D'ARCO* (VERDI)

Teatro Comunale, Bologna

1991: *DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE* (MOZART)

Teatro Massimo Bellini, Catania

1992: *LA DONNA DEL LAGO* (ROSSINI)

La Scala, Milan

1993: *DER FLIEGENDE HOLLÄNDER* (WAGNER)

Opéra Bastille, Paris

1994: *IL GUARANY* (GOMES)

Theater Bonn

1994: *NORMA* (BELLINI)

Verona Arena

1996: *IL GUARANY* (GOMES)

Washington National Opera

1997: *CHŪSINGURA* (SAEGUSA)

Tokyo Opera

1997: *TANNHÄUSER* (WAGNER)

Teatro de la Maestranza, Seville

Opéra Royal de Wallonie, Liège

1998: *TANNHÄUSER* (WAGNER)

Teatro di San Carlo, Naples

Teatro Massimo, Palermo

1999: *TANNHÄUSER* (WAGNER)

Teatro Real, Madrid

1999: *DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE* (MOZART)

Teatro Massimo Bellini, Catania

1999: *FIDELIO* (BEETHOVEN)

La Scala, Milan

2000: *TANNHÄUSER* (WAGNER)

Baltimore Opera Company

2001: *GIOVANNA D'ARCO* (VERDI)

Teatro Carlo Felice, Genoa

2001: *TANNHÄUSER* (WAGNER)

Theatro Municipal, Rio de Janeiro

Grand Opera, Houston

2001: *DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE* (MOZART)

Baltimore Opera Company

2002: *DER FLIEGENDE HOLLÄNDER* (WAGNER)

Domstufen Festival, Erfurt

2003: *FIDELIO* (BEETHOVEN)

La Scala, Milan

2008: *PARSIFAL* (WAGNER)

Palau de les Arts, Valencia

2013: *I DUE FOSCARI* (VERDI)

Teatro dell'Opera, Rome

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Werner Herzog** was born in Munich on September 5, 1942. He made his first film in 1961 at the age of nineteen. Since then he has produced, written, and directed more than sixty feature and documentary films, including *Aguirre*, *Nosferatu*, *Fitzcarraldo*, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, *My Best Fiend*, *Grizzly Man*, *Encounters at the End of the World*, and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. Herzog has published more than a dozen books of poetry and prose, most recently *The Twilight World*, and directed as many operas. He has appeared as an actor in *Jack Reacher*, *The Mandalorian*, and *The Simpsons*, and exhibited an art installation, *Hearsay of the Soul*, at the 2012 Whitney Biennale and the Getty Museum. He also founded his own Rogue Film School as a counterpoint to what is taught in most film schools around the world. He lives in Munich and Los Angeles.

**Michael Hofmann** is a German-born poet who writes in English. He has translated the works of Bertolt Brecht, Franz Kafka, Hans Fallada, and Joseph Roth, and teaches at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

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